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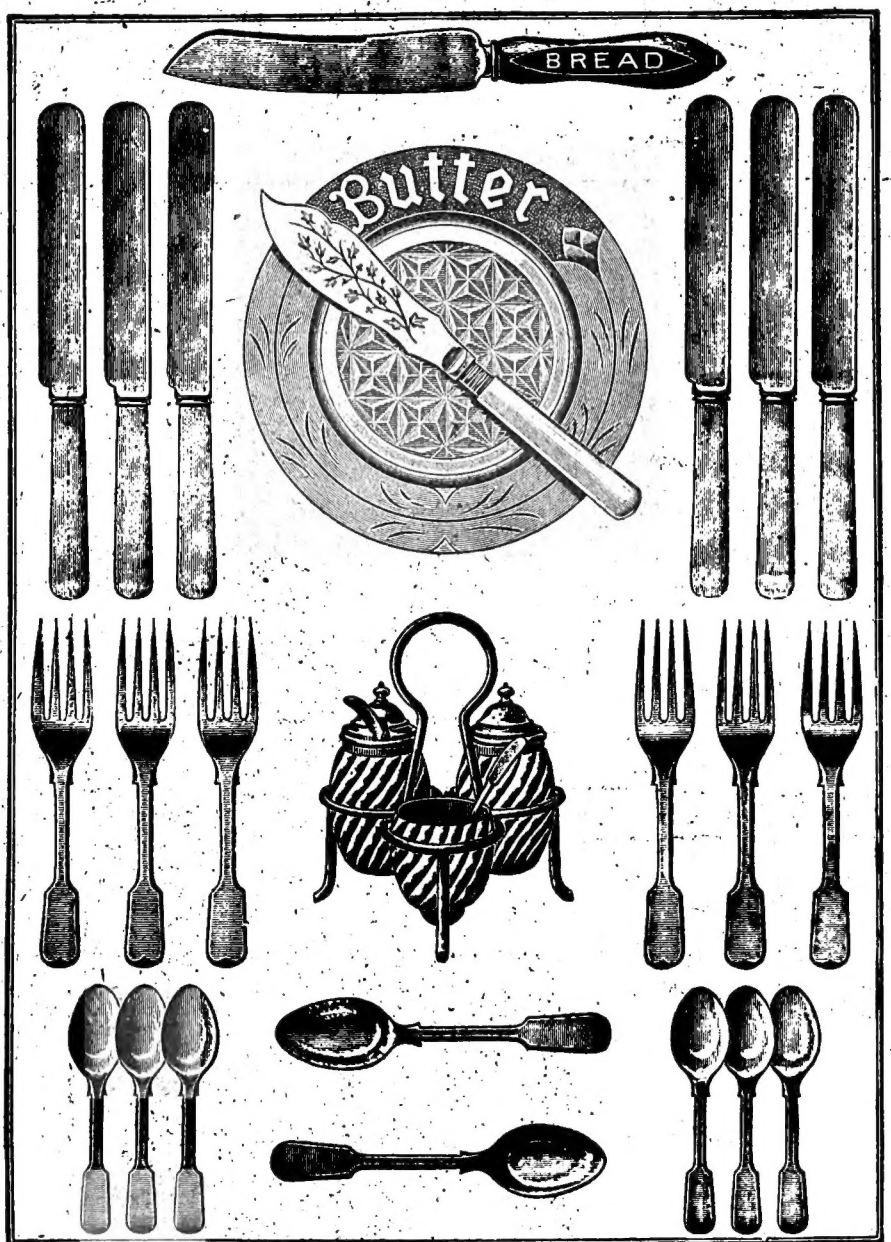

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SHORT STORIES

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Setting his back against the door, he faced the thief, and confronted Innocenza, her hands full of jewels, and the safe beside her broken open.

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A DUCHESS'S DAUGHTER.

A ROMANCE OF HIGH LIFE AND LOW LIFE, OF HONOUR AND DISHONOUR, OF TRUST AND DISTRUST.

CHAPTER I.

AN UNINVITED GUEST.

LONDON lay shrouded beneath a pall; snow had been falling all day. It lay in corners and under porticoes, where it had drifted and impeded the progress of rich and great, poor and unknown.

A carriage drew up before a house in Grosvenor Square, and the footman sprang off to run up the steps and ring the bell. The window was let down, and a voice within the carriage exclaimed, "The snow should have been swept from the steps, Williams; we can't get out with them in that state. Let it be done."

"Yes, your grace!" he returned.

The doors were flung wide, letting out a flood of light, and revealing a spacious hall with a row of expectant servants. The message was delivered, and the steps and pavement were speedily being swept under Williams' direction.

Keen eyes watched from the carriage, for when the sweepers paused in a group at one corner of the portico and whispered together, the same voice as before demanded, "What is the matter, Williams; why don't they finish?"

The footman approached and said, "What we thought was a heap of snow, your grace, is a girl who seems to have fainted."

"A girl? Poor thing!" said a new voice, fresh, clear, and sweet.

"Carry her indoors," commanded the Duchess, "and get the carpet as quick as you can, for we are frozen ourselves!"

The footman obeyed, with no surprise, for the Duchess of Babbacombe was a philanthropist, and had homes of industry and rest in town and country for her poorer neighbours. On several occasions beggars and tramps had been entertained in Grosvenor Square, with a fine disregard of conventionality. So a stalwart footman lifted what looked like a heap of clothes, and carried it within as if it were a usual occurrence. Soon the occupants of the carriage were also engulfed in the warmth and light, and the square was left to the snow and the north wind.

The Duchess was a handsome woman, who clung to the banded hair looped up over her ears which had been fashionable in her youth; but this severe style suited her, as did the head-band of diamond stars on black velvet which she wore on her head. She looked every inch an aristocrat of the old school as she bent over the couch where they had laid her uninvited guest, and where she was presently joined by her daughter, the Lady Muriel Delany.

The latter was a girl whose face had become familiar to the public in Society papers and photographers' windows as a recognised type of beauty; but no photograph could convey the exquisite colouring which was her greatest charm.

The velvety brown eyes contrasted so beautifully with the spun-gold hair and ivory skin, relieved by a delicate rose flush and scarlet lips.

Together they bent over the girl while a maid chafed the frozen hands and another forced brandy between the blue lips.

The object of their solicitude was as striking in her way as her noble hostesses. It was difficult to say whether she was beautiful or not, but from a painter's point of view the opaque dead whiteness of her skin was more artistic than Muriel's transparent complexion and suited well the peculiar ruddy gold hair. Her features were regular without being classical, and her serge dress was clean and neat. She had no hat or cloak, but she did not look poor; there was, indeed, a noticeable air of distinction about her.

"I wonder who she is?" murmured Muriel.

"Not a daughter of the people!" replied the Duchess. "Look at those shapely hands!"

Muriel bent to examine them, and saw that one was clenched. Stooping, she loosed the clinging fingers and gave a little cry, half of astonishment and half of fear, for the object the unconscious girl had grasped through all was a tiny ivory skull exquisitely carved and modelled and perfect in every detail.

It rolled to the floor, where it lay grinning with eyeless sockets and toothless gums at the pale faces above it. Muriel picked it up and laid it on the girl's lap. As she did so, the girl on the couch stirred and sighed, and slowly opened her eyes. An exclamation broke from the Duchess, for they were the most wonderful eyes she had ever seen. Green as emeralds and bright as diamonds, they stared into hers with a strange, scared, *haunted* look in their depths, which gave her a sense of fear most foreign to her nature.

"Are you better?" she asked.

The girl nodded but never moved her eyes from the Duchess's face.

"How did you come to be out such a night?" inquired the elder lady. "Have you no home?"

The girl made no reply this time, but struggled slowly to a sitting position, and put her hand to her head as if in pain.

"What is your name?" was the next query, with a touch of imperiousness, for the Duchess could not understand this continued silence.

For answer the girl began to search in her pocket for something, and presently produced a note-book and pencil.

Tearing out a page, she wrote:

"I'm dumb and friendless, but ought never to have come in here. Forgive! I am thankful to you, but pray let me go!"

As the Duchess read this, the girl sprung to her feet and made for the door, but before she reached it she fell heavily through sheer weakness.

"She ought not to go!" exclaimed Muriel.

"The Golden Dwarf" begins the week after next.

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"No," replied her mother. "She must remain, and we'll see what can be done. Make a bed in the nursery," she added to the housemaid, "and let someone sleep with her, or in the same room."

Then she swept from the apartment, followed by her daughter, and in another hour the house was wrapt in darkness.

But silence had not long fallen upon it before Muriel, who was a light sleeper, was aroused from dreams of her ball-room triumphs last night by a stealthy footstep creeping past her door. There was no doubt about it, for a board cracked, and she could distinguish the sound of breathing.

Slipping out of bed she put on her dressing-gown. As she did so her clock chimed five, so she knew it was too

To her dismay the girl flung herself at her feet. Her eyes streamed with tears, and her slender frame was shaken almost to pieces by violent sobs.

early for any of the servants to be up. Fearing she knew not what she opened her door and sped down the corridor after the wanderer.

Down the staircase pursued and pursuer hurried, and Muriel could catch the sound of the door in the carved screen being opened and shut. Courageously determined to see who it was, she crept through the door and by the light of the lamp shining through the fanlight she recognised the dumb girl fumbling at the door as if to get out.

"You!" she exclaimed.

The girl turned with a moan and, sinking at Muriel's feet, hid her face in her hands. Muriel raised her and kindly but firmly led her not to the old nursery, but to her own bedroom. The girl was dressed but shivering, so Muriel placed her in an arm-chair in front of the fire, which was not yet out, and by the aid of a little judicious handling soon burnt up brightly.

No one came in search of the fugitive, so Muriel concluded that the housemaid appointed to sleep with her had not been awakened by the escape.

Muriel, as she watched the girl from another chair, saw an intense listening look come over her face, while the scared expression in her eyes deepened. Presently she rose and walked to the windows, overlooking the square. Muriel sat wondering what she wanted, and never stirred when she opened one window, and let a rush of air into the room. She stood still for a moment, then drew the skull and a box of matches from her pocket. Striking one, she applied it to the skull, which at once gave out a glowing crimson light.

Holding it in her fingers, the girl thrust her arm out as far as she could, and remained so while Muriel counted sixteen.

Then, drawing it in, she blew it out, returned it to her pocket, shut the window, and came back to her seat by the fire. She sunk into it with a sigh, and closed her eyes. Soon she seemed to fall asleep, and when the ladies' maid entered at nine she was astonished to find both girls seated opposite each other, sleeping as peacefully as children.

That morning the household was alarmed to find traces of an attempted burglary, and Muriel, remembering her strange nocturnal adventures, shuddered, but kept silence.

CHAPTER II.

LADY MURIEL felt deeply interested in the strange girl who had so unexpectedly been brought to their door, and, having ascertained that she seemed too weak and ill to be sent away, had brought her to her boudoir.

Here the stranger sat down listlessly, making, in her black serge dress, a sombre blot on the scene.

Presently Muriel produced some ivory tablets and wrote: "What is your name?"

The other passed them back, and Muriel read "Innocenza!"

"How pretty!" ejaculated her hostess. "And your other name?"

The girl shook her head with a deep flush, and Muriel, sorry she had touched on a sore point, was about to change the subject, when the door partially opened, and a masculine voice observed: "May I come in?"

"Douglas!" exclaimed Muriel with a glad smile, holding out her hand in welcome to the noble specimen of English manhood who entered the room. Everyone admitted that Douglas Seymour Leslie, Earl of Morcambe, was indeed goodly to look upon. Tall, broad shouldered, deep-chested and lissom, with fair curly hair and deep honest blue eyes, he might have stood as a model for a Viking; while the golden moustache which shaded his upper lip gave a finishing touch to a face that was handsome without being effeminate.

He and Muriel had been playmates since childhood, and at the tender ages of three and five respectively had solemnly plighted their troth! Since then they had been constantly together, and though he had never spoken of love or proposed to her in set form yet they both understood each other and all their little world looked upon them as an engaged couple.

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She greeted him now with the look which a girl gives only to the man of her choice, and he was so engrossed in her that, not till he was well in the room, did he perceive Innocenza, who had risen and was looking from one to the other, as if uncertain what to do.

"I beg your pardon," said Douglas, bowing towards the shabby figure. "I didn't know you had a visitor."

Muriel was about to explain when with an inarticulate sound Innocenza hurried past them and left the room.

"What a striking-looking girl?" exclaimed the Earl, glancing after her. "Is that a new friend, Muriel?"

"Scarcely," replied the latter with a silvery laugh. Then she related how they had found her.

"Lucky for her it was at your mother's door she fainted," was his comment.

"Do you remember ever seeing my little cousin, Geraldine Wedmoreton?" he went on, irrelevantly.

"No!" she answered, surprised at his abrupt change of subject. "If you mean the one who was stolen by gipsies when she was a baby, certainly not. Why do you ask?"

"Because it's a very curious thing," he observed, with an embarrassed laugh, "but that waif of yours reminds me of her somehow."

"But you can't remember her either!" objected Muriel. "At the time she was stolen she was the same age as I was, three, and you were only five."

"No, of course I don't remember her actually," interposed the Earl, "but aunt has a miniature of her taken just before the kidnapping, and she had the same green eyes and red hair and white skin. That's what made me notice that girl. Has she said anything to you?"

"She can't say much!" responded Muriel, drily. "She's dumb."

"Good Heavens!" replied Douglas, starting. "How awful! So you don't know her name?"

"Just before you came I asked her what it was, and she said Innocenza; but she doesn't seem to have any other," replied Muriel rather wearily and feeling strangely jealous.

Douglas was silent a minute, and then said abruptly, "Might I see her again, Muriel?"

Muriel touched the bell, and sent the servant who answered it with a message to Innocenza that she wished to see her.

Douglas stepped forward when Innocenza entered the room, but Muriel kept coldly and proudly aloof.

"Do you remember anything about your childhood?" the Earl asked gently.

At the sound of his voice she started and looked full at him with inquiry, fear and surprise struggling for the mastery of her expressive face. He repeated the questions while she stared at him, until Muriel, with an impatient movement, thrust her own ivory tablets into the girl's nerveless hands.

Innocenza looked at them as if not knowing their use, but when Douglas smilingly held out a pencil she snatched it feverishly, and wrote with frantic haste:

"Why do you ask? Best let me go and not stay to spoil your lives. An outcast such as I am is not fit to breathe the same air. My childhood was, like my youth is now, all darkness and sorrow."

Muriel stepped forward and read it over his shoulder.

"Poor thing," she murmured, softening for a moment. "She looks as if she had been ill-used. Have you no father or mother?" she inquired, turning to the girl again.

Innocenza burst into tears, and sobbed so hysterically that Muriel whispered to Douglas that they had best not question her any more.

He assented, and added: "I'd better go now, but I shall drop in again as soon as possible."

The little cloud between the lovers had lightened somewhat, but Muriel noticed with a pang of jealousy that his last look was for the weeping girl and not for her. He had scarcely gone when the Duchess appeared, majestic in her morning dress of black silk canvas.

"Has Douglas gone?" she asked, glancing round the room.

"Yes," said Muriel a little sadly in a low voice. "He would ask Innocenza questions, and it has upset her."

At this point a powdered footman appeared with a note and a basket of rare exotics for "Lady Muriel Delany," and Innocenza took the opportunity of slipping out of the room with him.

"From Sir Ronald Curteis," said Muriel with a lovely blush. "He hopes I am not too fatigued after last night, and that he will meet us to-night at Lady Betty Foster's reception."

"Ah!" said the Duchess, "he's attentive, and, though only a baronet, more eligible than most men. His estates are splendid, and during his minority his property has been so carefully nursed that he is one of the richest men in London for his age and rank. Don't allow that girl to get intimate with you. As soon as possible I'll send her to my 'Home of Rest' in Devonshire, but she seems too weak to travel."

CHAPTER III.

LADY MURIEL evidently forgot all about her mother's advice, for the next morning she sent for Innocenza. The girl came submissively, though the haunted, scared look in her eyes had deepened. Her interest in life seemed to have revived, however, for she surveyed her surroundings with keen interest and, kneeling before Muriel, felt her dress with true feminine appreciation of its beauty.

"What are you thinking of?" asked Muriel, after a spell of silence.

Innocenza rose from her knees and began to make a tour of the apartment, touching the many pretty things it contained with evident delight and absorbed in lingering admiration.

At length she came to the inlaid writing-table crowded with the dainty and useless trifles which a girl gathers naturally about her in the course of time. Among them was a charming French almanac at which Innocenza looked at first with simple appreciation of its elegance, but as her eyes fell on the date she gave a little gasp of what sounded like horror.

Snatching it up she ran with it to Muriel's side, and, pointing to the figures twenty-three on it, looked in her face with almost agonised intensity.

Muriel, not quite understanding her evident agitation, inquired kindly:

"What is the matter?"

"Is that the right date?" wrote Innocenza rapidly.

"Yes," replied Muriel, "January twenty-third. I altered it this morning myself."

"Then I must go," was the next sentence scribbled down. "don't try to stop me, or the consequences may be serious."

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Muriel stared at her a moment, and then drew her to the window. Drawing aside the silk curtains she pointed to the square which was deep in fresh fallen snow; a dense fog, too, was rapidly gathering. Even while they looked it grew so dark they could scarcely see each other's faces, and Muriel had to switch on the electric light before she could find her way back to her chair.

"That settles it," she said with a little laugh. "It's quite impossible for you to go out, and I'm sure my mother won't let you."

To her dismay the girl flung herself at her feet. Her eyes streamed with tears, her slender frame was shaken almost to pieces by the most violent sobs, and she raised her clasped hands as if in prayer. Puzzled, alarmed, and at a loss to account for her almost hysterical agitation, Muriel raised her from the floor and soothed her as well as she could.

Presently the paroxysm passed somewhat, and searching for her note-book, she wrote on it, "Indeed I speak the truth. It is imperative for me to go or harm will come to you and yours."

"Why are you in such a hurry to go to-day?" she asked, a little coldly. "Why would not to-morrow do as well?"

"Because I have an appointment for to-night!" was the written answer. "My whole life may depend on my keeping it! For the love of Heaven let me go!"

Muriel wavered. The girl appeared in such deadly earnest, and it seemed too bad to keep her back if her private affairs required her presence.

"Where do you want to go?" she asked.

Innocenza palpably hesitated, and then reluctantly wrote: "Plane Tree Walk, Hampstead."

"I never heard of the place before," said Muriel, "and, anyhow, you would never get there in this fog, so you *must* give it up till to-morrow. Shall I write or telegraph for you?"

The girl moaned and shook her head, and Muriel, a little annoyed at her persistence and the impossibility of contenting her, turned away. Innocenza began crying again, not loudly this time, but with a bitter despair and silent anguish which seemed inconsolable. The paper which she had written on fluttered unheeded to the floor, where it lay with the address uppermost.

There were all the elements of tragedy in that dainty room, as even the powdered footman felt as he flung open the door and announced: "The Earl of Morcambe!"

"Douglas!" exclaimed Muriel, hastening forward with outstretched hands and radiant smile. "I never expected you such a day as this!"

"Well, I had some difficulty in getting here," he laughed gaily as he bent chivalrously over her taper fingers, "but I came to——" and then he paused abruptly, for his eyes fell on Innocenza, who was trying in vain to stifle her sobs. Again that jealous pang shot through Muriel as she noted his look of concern.

"It's really nothing!" she whispered, in answer to his inquiring eyes. "She wanted to go to Hampstead, and, of course, she can't. I believe it will do just as well to-morrow, only she chose to make a scene."

Douglas made no reply, but, stepping forward, took the girl's nerveless hand in his, and said gently:

"Is it very important for you to go, my poor child?"

She nodded vehemently, darting an anxious glance at Muriel meanwhile, as if afraid this might displease her.

"If someone went to explain about you, would that do?" he inquired in the same kind tone.

She nodded again, but less decisively.

"Is this the address?" he went on, picking up the paper from the floor.

Again she bent her head, with a look of surprise on her face.

He dropped her hand, and rose with the masterful air Muriel knew so well.

"Then I will go and explain!" he exclaimed impulsively.

"Impossible!" cried Muriel, starting forward. "Why should you? Besides, you will never find your way there."

"I found my way here!" he retorted, and was gone before she realised it.

As his footsteps died on the stairs, Muriel turned on Innocenza.

"This is your doing!" she exclaimed, "and if evil comes of it, I'll never forget or forgive!"

She was so blinded by emotion, she did not hear the cry that broke from the girl's lips, nor saw the hands stretched towards her, but swept from the room without another word. Had she looked back, she would have seen that Innocenza had fallen forward on the floor in a dead faint.

CHAPTER IV.

DOUGLAS stood in the street. A hansom loomed out of the fog.

Seeing the Earl, the cabman raised his hand tentatively in hope of a fare, and before he realised it, the Earl was in the cab creeping cautiously towards Hampstead.

As they advanced the fog lifted, and by the time they got to the Heath, the darkness was merely that of an ordinary January afternoon. Still only half the difficulty was surmounted, for the cabman had never heard of Plane Tree Walk, and, in desperation, the Earl jumped out and dismissed him.

"I'll walk the rest!" he observed. "Don't apologise, man! You've done your best!" with that he turned away.

By dint of asking here and there he reached the road at last and found the place he wanted.

The house was dark and silent, and the bell he pulled clanged dolefully in the distance, as if echoing through many empty rooms. Presently he detected the sound of footsteps approaching within, various bolts and bars seemed to be drawn, and the ponderous door was slowly opened. A man appeared in the aperture holding a lamp above his head and dressed in a sort of livery.

"Can I see——" began Douglas; then the difficulty of explaining, and his ignorance of whom to ask for, made him pause.

"Do you bring news of Innocenza?" asked the man, in a singularly refined voice, peering at him steadily.

"Yes, that's it," cried the Earl, relieved at having his path made so unexpectedly easy for him. "Fact is ——"

The man raised his hand, respectfully, peremptorily.

"That's for other ears than mine!" he observed. "Step in."

Wonderingly, Douglas obeyed, and as he did so, noticed that the man wore as a scarf-pin a miniature ivory skull. He shuddered a little and marvelled how a

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servant in a big house was allowed to wear so gruesome an ornament.

The hall was handsome, being paved with marble of various colours and hung with magnificent tapestry, but otherwise unfurnished.

Douglas followed the man into a room furnished in old oak. Here he was left and walking to the open fire-place to warm his hands he noticed with another disagreeable thrill that the carving on the chairs formed miniature skulls, and an ivory one occupied a position on the mantel-piece.

"What queer taste," he muttered, and then, glancing round, saw he was no longer alone. A gipsy-looking man in evening dress was at his elbow, and on his shirt-front gleamed out the hideous skull, in diamonds this time. Rather taken aback, Douglas bowed, and began: "I hope you will pardon my intrusion, but——" He paused, at a loss what to call Innocenza, but the gipsy interrupted.

"She isn't coming back to-night," he observed, having evidently been told the object of the stranger's visit.

"She's unable," replied Douglas. "The fog was so thick it was impossible; but meanwhile she's in safe hands, and hopes to come to-morrow."

"To-morrow will be too late, and she knows it!" said the man fiercely. "She has done it on purpose."

"Pardon me, but may I ask what position the young lady occupies in your household?"

"She is my adopted daughter," replied the man.

"*Adopted!*" exclaimed Douglas. "How came you to adopt her?"

The gipsy looked up and said: "I don't see why you shouldn't know. I've nothing to be ashamed of. I found a baby under a rock in Scotland, and, as no one claimed it, adopted it."

Douglas' face fell. This was not the accepted version of his cousin's disappearance.

"Would you tell me the name of the place?" he asked.

"I'd like to know what these questions mean!" retorted the man.

"Willingly," answered the Earl, and gave the story.

The gipsy listened with a peculiar expression.

When Douglas had finished, he said: "The name of the place was Blairlochran, and this was round the child's neck."

He held out locket as he spoke.

It fell open as Douglas touched it, and disclosed a face at sight of which Douglas uttered an exclamation. The gipsy showed no sign of curiosity.

"This is my aunt!" said Douglas. "I'm right; but how can I prove it?"

"Best way would be to make inquiries," observed the man. "I never did, but I don't want to stand in the girl's way, and I'll surrender her to her mother if you prove the relationship."

In another hour the Earl was speeding to Blairlochran.

CHAPTER V.

BABBACOMBE HOUSE was silent and dull after the storm that had lately swept over it. The Duchess had gone out, but Lady Muriel had steadily refused to accompany her, and, on the plea of a severe headache, had shut herself into her room.

Her mother was not fully acquainted with what had taken place the previous day, and only knew that Innocenza had been found in a dead faint on the floor of her daughter's boudoir. She was not sorry to find that the latter seemed to have got over her fascination for the beggar-maid, and did not even inquire after her. Meanwhile, Innocenza felt acutely the chill of neglect that had fallen upon her, for the servants were not slow to notice and take advantage of the fact that she had fallen into disgrace with Lady Muriel.

The housekeeper found her cowering in her fireless bedroom, and was moved to pity by her small white face and pathetic eyes.

"It's too cold for you up here," she said kindly, taking her by the arm. "Come down to my room; there's a fire there."

Innocenza meekly suffered herself to be led downstairs, where she was installed on a chair by the fire and told to stay there and get warm while the housekeeper finished some work upstairs.

The servants' quarters extended through the whole basement, the kitchens and sculleries being at the back, and the servants' hall and housekeeper's rooms in front.

At this time of day the domestics were all either upstairs, or in the back premises, and the servants' hall was deserted. The housekeeper's sitting-room opened out of it, and had two windows looking on to the front area steps.

It also had two doors, the second of which opened into the long passage which ran from front to back, while the front area door was but a step away. Suddenly a shadow fell across the window and Innocenza looked up. She saw that a man had quietly descended the steps, and was peering in at her.

He was a gipsy-looking man in rags, with a basket, and at sight of him she uttered a little cry, for he wore an ivory skull.

Putting his lips close to the glass he muttered, "You must come out of this at once, do you hear? Now let's have no trouble about it, but just do what I tell you!"

His roughness was quite unnecessary, for Innocenza made no resistance. Rising meekly, she threw round her the dark cloak he produced from his basket, fastened on the straw hat he handed her from the same receptacle, and followed him quietly into the street.

Innocenza and the ragged gipsy entered the house in Hampstead by a side door.

"We managed that rather cleverly!" the man said complacently. "Have some refreshment now, girl, after all your adventures."

"Come," he continued, when she shook her head passionately. "You needn't keep that farce up with me! We're alone, and I want to know how it was you came away so willingly. I expected trouble."

Innocenza turned her head and *spoke.*

How surprised her late companions would have been at the sound of her rich, deep, contralto voice.

"I came," she said, "because I was anxious to get away from a house where I had done mischief."

"Rubbish!" he retorted. "You hadn't done anything, and that's what I complain of. Of course, when we saw the danger signal, we were bound to clear out, but to this hour I don't know why you showed it!"

"What if I showed it because for some reason my soul revolted at turning traitor to the good Samaritans who had taken me in and cared for me without

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question?" asked the girl, turning blazing eyes upon him.

"What of it?" he sneered. "Why, I should say it was a little late in the day for you to have scruples."

She flushed at his tone, but went on:

"This is the first time I have failed, but it will not be the last. That night when I feigned faintness on the doorstep and was carried into the house, I felt something within me which held me back from doing what I had to do, and in the middle of the night I tried to escape, but was discovered and taken back. Then it was I resolved to show the red light and save that household from unknown dangers."

"Unknown fiddlesticks!" he answered. "You've done more damage than you're aware of, but I found it out in time."

She was silent till he said, "Do you know who that dandy was whom you sent the other night?"

"May I take it that my faithfulness is to be rewarded?" he whispered.

"Yes!" she answered, "Lord Morcambe!"

He looked at her for a minute and observed: "And you're in love with him?"

She shrank a little but answered, "Yes, I am, and what's more I think he's in love with me, and that's why I came away quietly, for he's all but engaged to Lady Muriel, and if I'd stayed longer it might have spoilt her life, but I love him devotedly, madly!"

"My revenge," he laughed to himself, "is sweeter than I expected. How richly, my lady, will I repay every insult you offered me in days gone by!" He turned to the girl, who was sunk in thought: "What would you say if I told you you're are as good any day as your Lady Muriel? What would you say if I told you you are that young man's cousin? That your name is Geraldine Wedmoreton, and your mother Lady Wedmoreton?"

"Then—why——?" gasped Innocenza, rising to her feet.

"Why are you in disguise?" he continued. "Well, it's a long story; but in brief, it's this: I was in your mother's service as head keeper, and one day, before her guests, she insulted me. My family is as good as hers, for my father was a Hungarian nobleman, and I swore to be revenged. Your nurse took you for a walk next day in the woods; that evening you and I disappeared. That's all!"

With that he left the room, and she sank into a chair, crying bitterly.

CHAPTER VI.

It was the afternoon of the third day after Innocenza's flight before Muriel saw Douglas again. She was sitting before the fire in the boudoir. She greeted him coldly, but he was too full of his news to notice her manner.

"Congratulate me, Muriel!" he cried, "I've found my cousin!"

"I congratulate you!" she answered, without the slightest enthusiasm.

"May I tell you all about it?" he asked eagerly. "It all sounds like a romance," he went on. "Listen!" and he poured out the story.

At Blairlochran he found he had been duped, for though the Wedmoretons had had a hunting-lodge near, Geraldine had been kidnapped at their Essex estate. However, in the village he discovered an unexpected ally in an old woman who proved to have been the little Geraldine's nurse. She was a native of the place, and had been sent home in disgrace after the catastrophe.

No one guessed how she mourned the loss of her charge, but she only knew what she had reiterated over and over again, that the child had been sleepy and she had laid it on a shawl in the sun while she was picking flowers. She must have wandered further than she knew, for she never heard a step or saw a soul, and yet, on her return to the spot, she found baby and shawl gone. Of course, the simultaneous disappearance of the keeper had brought suspicion on him, but no trace of either had been found.

She declared she should know him again anywhere, and as for her charge, there was a black mole on her left shoulder, which alone was sufficient apart from her peculiar colouring.

Besides, she was wearing a miniature of her mother round her neck.

This settled the matter for Douglas. With the sanguine buoyancy of youth he made up his mind he had found his long-lost cousin, whirled the astonished old Scotchwoman off to London, installed her in lodgings, and intended to take her to Hampstead on the morrow to confront the Hungarian with her.

Muriel listened in cold silence, and offered no comment or remark during his narrative.

"Aren't you pleased, Muriel?" he asked wistfully. "I thought you'd be so glad, as you're almost a member of the family?"

She winced as she answered slowly:

"Of course, I'm glad. The only thing is, I think, you're jumping to conclusions a little too fast, and making too sure that this is your cousin."

"We'll soon set that right," he answered joyously, "but now I want just to see her for a minute, Muriel, if you don't mind. I shan't say anything to her, of course, but I feel as if another look at her would convince me."

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"You would be welcome to look at her if it were possible," she replied, coolly, "but unluckily she's gone."

"Gone!" he ejaculated, blankly. "Oh, I suppose you mean to Devonshire."

"No, I don't!" she returned, steadily. "We don't know where she has gone. One morning, three days ago, she took French leave and disappeared, leaving all the doors open."

"She's sure to be at Hampstead!" he exclaimed, starting up. "I must be off, Muriel. Good-bye."

It never entered his honest head that Muriel could be jealous of his cousin or misunderstand his anxiety about her. Five minutes after he had left her he had forgotten all except the blow of Innocenza's disappearance, and as he drove rapidly towards his aunt's house, he was wondering what he would say.

Meanwhile Muriel was left by the fire to murmur passionately:

"I hate her! I hate her! She has stolen him from me!"

Her jealousy grew greater as the afternoon went on, and when she appeared in the ballroom that night, holding a posy of flowers from a bouquet Sir Ronald Curteis had sent in the morning, he was not wrong to allow his hopes of favour to rise high.

When he came up to claim his first dance, and she remarked: "Let us sit it out, I'm so tired!" he was only too delighted to comply.

"Thank you for your flowers, Sir Ronald," she said at last, raising her eyes from her bouquet. "It was good of you to send them."

"Thank *you* for accepting them!" he replied. "You've gratified me to-night as I never expected or hoped."

She did not check him as usual, but looked down silently, and the flowers trembled as if a breeze had passed over them.

"Is it a favourable sign?" he whispered edging nearer. "May I take it that my faithfulness is to be rewarded."

"It depends upon the reward, does it not?" she queried lightly.

"You know well enough what I want," he answered passionately. "You know that since the first day we met I've loved you madly! Ah! give me at least one word of hope to feed my starved heart upon! Let me have something to look forward to!"

He had expected to be stopped long ere this, but had gone desperately on, for he really loved this fair, proud beauty and longed to win her.

"Tell me what you would wish?" she murmured softly.

"Muriel," he gasped, "do you know what you are saying? Do you mean it? Will you really be my wife?"

"If you wish it," she replied, and, carried away by delight, he bent and kissed her.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, Douglas had made his way to Hampstead after leaving Muriel. He had no difficulty in finding Plane Tree Walk, but the house was closed, and a "To Let" board had been planted in the wilderness of a garden. Inquiries in the neighbourhood revealed nothing—the former occupants, quiet people, had left, that was all. In despair he retraced his steps to his aunt, and suggested the employment of detectives, but she would not hear of it.

"I could not bear my child hunted like some criminal," she said.

It was not till the next afternoon at the club that he heard the news of Muriel's engagement. He overheard two men he did not know talking about the ball; they were sitting close to him, and much as he would have wished not to listen, when they mentioned Muriel's name he could not resist.

It was clear from what they said that she was indeed engaged to Sir Ronald. She had danced with him continually, and his air of proprietorship was unmistakeable; moreover, a well-founded report was about that he had been seen kissing her in the ante-room. So wags the world.

For a while Douglas sat as if stunned. Then his first thought was to go to her for corroboration. When he reached the house, he was outwardly calm, but inwardly in a state of terrible turmoil. He was shewn up to her boudoir. As she rose to meet him, she looked more lovely than ever, but he took no heed, and gave her no greeting.

"Is the rumour true?" he asked.

"If you mean am I engaged to Ronald Curteis, yes!" she answered.

Douglas stood for a second wavering, and then, afraid to trust himself to speak, he turned, and left the room. Muriel took half a step forward as the door closed, and called after him with a sort of choking cry. Then the whole world she had lost swam before her eyes, and she fell in a dead swoon.

It was not till late that evening that Douglas had sufficiently recovered from his severe shock to think what he should do. And then he felt he could not sleep, and so sought some means of diversion, no difficult thing for a society man as a rule. It was not in this case. He remembered that a Russian princess whom he knew was giving a ball for which he had received a pressing invitation.

Neither the Babbacombes nor Sir Ronald were in this "set," so there was no danger, and when he entered the house in Portman Square the music and the crowd served to amuse him.

The Princess received him with pleasure. He chatted as long as politeness required, and then wandered through the rooms. At last he arrived in one where skirt-dancing was going on, and being able to see over the heads of the crowd, saw, to his amazement, that Innocenza was the performer.

The graceful dance brought her nearer, and his fixed gaze of astonishment attracted her eyes. With a startled cry she slipped and fell, but was up again in an instant and continued her dance to the end.

His intention was to intercept her as soon as she finished, but she was too quick for him. Before he could penetrate the crowd between them she had vanished, and search as he would he could find no trace of her.

He was slowly descending the stairs on his way out, when sudden faintness overtook him and he turned ghastly pale. The Princess, who was near at the time, was much concerned.

"Why not remain here for to-night?" she exclaimed hospitably. "You really look quite ill, and are not fit to face the cold. It is strange that this is the second attack of illness in this house to-night. My little

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skirt-dancer has sprained her ankle, and had to be accommodated with a bed, as she was too bad to go home!"

This silenced Douglas' protestations.

He was soon installed in a luxurious bedroom, but sleep forsook him. The illness had passed but his senses were all on the alert, and when he heard a stealthy footstep creeping past his door instinct made him spring out of bed and hurry on a few clothes.

By the time he was ready the footstep was creaking downstairs, and he rapidly followed across the landing and on to the door of a room where he knew the Princess kept her jewels. In it glided and he heard sounds that convinced him robbery was the motive. For a moment he thought of rousing the household but mercifully repented. Instead, he stepped quietly inside and switched on the electric light. Setting his back against the door he faced the thief, and—confronted Innocenza, her hands full of jewels and the safe beside her broken open.

CHAPTER VII.

"You!" he gasped.

She was still in her dancing costume, and a miniature ivory skull lay at her feet. She dropped her glittering burden and covered her face with her hands, but at his voice she lifted her head again and faced him boldly.

"Let me go!" she cried piteously. "Let me pass out of your life as I passed into it and become again the outcast I am!"

Even in his mental confusion and bewilderment he was struck at the apparent miracle that had taken place.

"You're not really dumb, then?" he exclaimed.

"No!" she said. "That is of a piece with the rest. I was taught to practise this deception because it earned pity for me and diverted suspicion."

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Stealing!" she re orted defiantly. "I have been brought up as a profe sional burglar, although this is the first time I have ever actually stolen anything myself. My part has been to get an entrance into the house and then prepare the way for the rest of the gang."

"Then your faint on the steps of Babbacombe House ——"

"*Was* a feint!" she interrupted fiercely. "I was as sensible as anyone all the time, and when I was carried in, I meant to open the doors for the others, but something stopped me, and I showed the danger signal instead."

"And your sprained ankle to-night?"

"Was another lie," she said sullenly. "I've been taught skirt-dancing so as to get engagements at grand houses and make it easy to rob them."

"You must not be found here," he said desperately; "and yet, how get you out? How—explain? I have it! Sleep-walking! That's the thing!"

"I'm afraid they will scarcely believe it," she answered bitterly. "I'm only a poor skirt-dancer to them. No—no, let them know the truth."

"That's impossible!" he exclaimed firmly. "You do not know who you really are, or you would not counsel such a proceeding."

"Yes, I *do* know who I am," she replied unexpectedly. "Your cousin!"

"Who told you?" he asked.

"My adopted father," she answered, "who is probably at work in the basement and waiting for my share of the spoil. Hadn't you better alarm the house?"

"Listen!" he said quietly. "If you will give me your word of honour that you won't try to get away, I'll lock you in here and keep off the polise till I can smuggle you quietly out of the house. Will you promise?"

"Yes!" she answered, with a steady look into his eyes. "I promise."

There was only one door in the room, and the window was strongly barred, so after a glance round he gathered up the radiant heap of jewels and thrust them into the safe.

Scarcely had he done so than the handle of the door was turned outside, and a voice which he recognised as that of the Princess exclaimed:

"This is where the voices came from, and the door is locked inside! Break it open!"

Quick as thought he switched off the electric light, unlocked the door, and taking out the key, opened the door just wide enough to slip out.

Shutting it behind him he coolly locked it, and put the key in his pocket, ere turning to face the motley crowd in the corridor.

As the Earl appeared, the Princess clutched his arm.

"You have caught one of the burglars," she eagerly exclaimed; "is he in there?"

"I've locked the door, so it's all right," replied the Earl evasively; "but before we do more, might I ask if you've secured the burglars in the basement?"

"One of them we have, my lord," interposed the butler; "he seems to be a foreigner. Shall we send for the police?"

"Before they come I want to see him," said Douglas. "Might I suggest that every lady had better go back to bed?"

The crowd drifted away till only the Princess was left. She eyed the Earl askance, but her nationality led her to take things calmly, and she did not seem much surprised at his words or actions.

"If you will grant me an interview to-morrow," he said humbly, "I will explain all that may seem odd."

"It is to-morrow now," she said with a little laugh, pointing to the sickly daylight struggling through the corridor window; "I will wait in my boudoir till you come."

With this she swept away, and the Earl descended to the basement, where he found the Hungarian carefully guarded by two stalwart footmen.

The man was sitting sullenly in a bare little room, and merely looked up defiantly when the young nobleman stood before him.

Dismissing his guards, Douglas faced him with folded arms, and at last said quietly:

"At length you are caught and my cousin found. The only wonder is you have escaped so long."

"Easily explained," retorted the man insolently. "As soon as I had stolen the child I made tracks for Hungary. Your aunt was prostrated by grief, your uncle dead, and the servants incapable and dishonest, so I made my escape without let or hindrance. Once in my native country there was no danger, and I took care not to leave it till the hue and cry were well over."

"I see," said Douglas thoughtfully. "Fortune favoured

R. Norman Silver's best novel, "The Golden Dwarf."

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you, and no doubt would have continued to do so had you not relaxed your cunning. The mistake you made in sending her to a house where I was a constant visitor——"

"Are you sure it was a mistake?" asked the man significantly. "On the contrary, it was all part of my revenge. I knew that the girl's death would be forgotten in time, but disgrace is never forgotten! So I trained her to be a professional thief, and bided my time. We have never been caught before, but I meant that one day we should be caught, and then I intended to proclaim to the world her name and rank, and say to the proud woman who insulted me: 'That is your child in the grasp of the police, handcuffed and sentenced to prison for stealing'; and I knew that that moment my revenge would be complete, and old scores wiped out!"

The Earl stood aghast.

Such a subtle revenge would never have occurred to him, and yet he appreciated its completeness at its true value. His aunt would never survive the public disgrace, and, at best, the stigma could never be removed, even if the whole thing were hushed up.

"Of course, I never meant her to be found by you," continued the gipsy, "and you have anticipated me a little; but even if you protect her, as, of course, you will try to do, still I shall publish the facts before the police-magistrate to-morrow, and when I am released I shall take care to spread the whole story."

Douglas hesitated. It was repugnant to his whole nature to bribe such a scoundrel, and he knew it would probably mean hush-money for the rest of their mutual existence, even if the man consented to forego his revenge; but, for the sake of his unhappy aunt and cousin, he was turning the idea over in his mind, when the Hungarian suddenly made a dash for the door. Douglas had forgotten to lock it on entering, and the man was outside in the twinkling of an eye. It never became clear why he made this bid for liberty, for he only got halfway towards the door when one of the footman saw him, raised his revolver and fired. The man reeled and fell, and Douglas, coming up at that moment, saw at a glance that he was dead.

Giving orders for the body to be removed and the police sent for, he rapidly mounted the stairs, quieted those of the household who were alarmed at the report, and then joined the Princess in her boudoir.

"Princess!" he said abruptly, "can you keep a secret?"

"If I could not I should be at this moment in the mines of Siberia!" she answered.

Then without further preface he poured out his story, while she listened in silence.

"You have not lost a single jewel," he said in conclusion, "the police need only be told that this man was shot while trying to escape, and only you and I need know who was locked up in your jewel-room. Be merciful as you are strong, and spare our family this disgrace!"

"Say no more!" she answered meaningly. "I will act as if you were my son. Go and release your prisoner and bring her here."

* * * * *

When Muriel woke out of her swoon, it was only to the worse result of an attack of brain fever. Incessantly she raved in her delirium of her revenge upon Douglas by means of her engagement to Sir Ronald. How it leaked out was never known, but by the time she was convalescent all Society was aware of the fact that she had engaged herself to him out of mere pique, and was really, as everyone had always said, in love with the Earl. Sir Ronald himself heard of it, and as soon as he was permitted to see her he called.

"Muriel," he said, after a few words of congratulation on her convalescence and a spell of everyday talk, "the nurse will only let me stay with you five minutes longer, and before I go I have something I wish to say to you, something that will, I think, be welcome to you."

"What is it, Ronald?" asked Muriel, with no thought of what he really wished to say.

"I think we have made a mistake, Muriel," he went on gently. "I think we did not thoroughly understand one another that night at the ball——"

"What do you mean?" interrupted Muriel.

"I mean that it will be a mistake for us to marry one another, dear. I mean that I should like you to release me from my engagement."

"But——" objected Muriel,

"You are too ill to argue, you know, and here is the nurse at the door to turn me out. I have already overstayed my allotted time."

They took one another's hands, and Muriel's eyes thanked him. She could not trust herself to speak. The old days of chivalry were after all not dead.

Douglas and Muriel never quite knew themselves how it was managed, but the Duchess and Lady Wedmoreton, having stepped into the breach, were not likely, old campaigners as they were, to retreat until they had effected their object, which was to bring the two young people together again. They succeeded perfectly. When at last they met, Muriel still thought Douglas was to be married to Innocenza.

"I want to ask your pardon," said Muriel at last, "for my ill-temper, and to say that I have bitterly repented of it. I wish you all happiness, and some day, perhaps, you will let me be friends with you and your wife."

Douglas looked almost with awe at this humble, gentle girl, and his voice was husky as he said: "Let bygones be bygones between us, Muriel. I, too, was to blame; but as for my wife, you cannot be friends, for I have no wife."

"But you will have," she murmured.

He did not contradict her; and she sank into a chair and, bowing her head on her hands, cried for very weakness and weariness. Then she felt a caressing touch on her hair, and heard a low voice say tenderly:

"Shall we begin again, Muriel, and profit by our mistakes?"

She scarcely dared believe her ears, but one look at his face convinced her.

"I have had a bitter lesson," she sobbed. "One I shall never forget."

"And the ring must be of sapphires this time," he said kissing her. "You know the old rhyme—

"Green's forsaken and yellow's forsworn,
But blue is the truest colour that's worn."

* * * * *

Lady Wedmoreton and her daughter went to reside abroad, and Innocenza kept her own counsel, so that her secret died with her in that far-off land whence she never returned.

THE END.

"The Golden Dwarf" begins the week after next.

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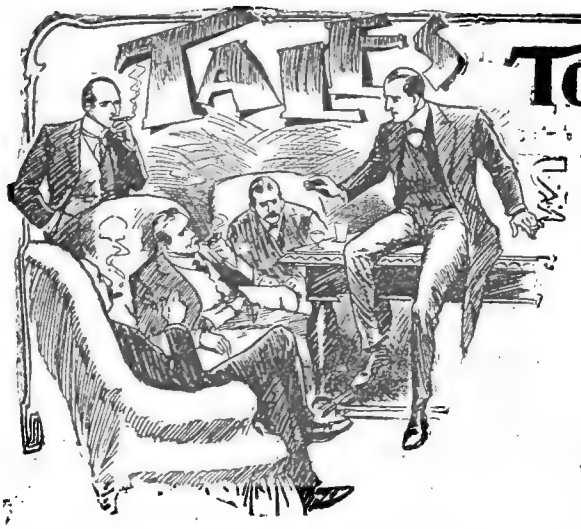

Told off Duty.

A Desperate Stratagem.

Told by the Lock-Keeper.

"Dear me, dear me! Another suicide from Waterloo Bridge. A young, well-dressed man was seen to throw himself off the parapet this morning at half-past two, and nothing has been seen of his body since. Lord, what romances the murky Thames could reveal if it only had a gift of speech!" And so saying, Bill Dryden, the fireman, relinquished with a sigh the evening paper he had just been perusing.

"Ay, there's no mistake about that," observed Jonas Myers, a square man of about fifty, with a face scorched deep-brown by long exposure to the sun. Jonas was not a member of the club, but was there on this night merely as a guest. "Mighty mysterious, this great London, surely! But as regards the river hereabouts, it don't hold the monopoly of romance, I assure you. The upper reaches of the Thames have their tragic stories, too; among them one that unfolded itself under my own eyes."

There was something ominous in the guest's manner of utterance, something that seemed to command attention. Pressed to recount the story to which he alluded, Jonas Myers began:

"I've been a lock-keeper most of my life. As a boy, I helped my old father—God rest his soul!—and when I became a man, the Thames Conservancy, to whom I applied, were kind enough to give me charge of the lock at Ingfield, a quiet bit of a place up towards Oxford

"I a'in't going to say that lock-keepers are too well paid; but being a single man, what with my wages and an occasional bright shilling from a good-hearted boating party, I was able in the course of years, to pack up a little parcel of about thirty pounds. Not being a man to let money get rusty, I purchased two or three pleasure boats out of my savings, and so well did these let, that I was able, after a time, to add other craft, and to employ a couple of hands—a man and a boy—to help me in my double business.

"Now, as these two have a good deal to do with my story, I may be permitted to tell you something about them. The man—Mike Deever, by name—was a powerful, swarthy chap, with queer, shifty eyes, and a lank face the reverse of prepossessing. But you don't consider looks in engaging a boatman, and Deever was about the handiest man with an oar, punt-pole or fishing-rod, that I have ever seen. He could have done very well too, could Mike, for tips from angling parties were frequent in the season, and many a crown did he get for a pike or barbel, from gentlemen anxious to have a catch to show when they reached home. Unfortunately, Deever was a little too fond of raising his elbow, and that habit, as you know, and the habit of saving money never do make close pals of one another."

"That's true!" remarked Jim Chilvery, the engine-driver. "When a man's fond of the bottle, gold, silver and copper melt and run out of the neck of it."

"The boy I mentioned," continued Jones, nodding his head in approval of the sententious Chilvery, "was about sixteen, honest as the day, hardworking as a horse, but just a little bit touched here," and the lock-keeper tapped his forehead solemnly. "The boys about the place called him 'Daft Joe.' Howsomever, that's enough about him at present. Let me get on with my story.

"It was on a beautiful September afternoon that Mike Deever came to me, saying that young Mr. Horton, son of the neighbouring squire, and another gentleman named Mr. Lester, required him on a fishing expedition. Miss Grace Ford, a beautiful young lady to whom the young squire was engaged, was also to be of the party.

"'Right you are, Mike?' I said. 'Where are you going?'

"'To the Black Pool, master.'

"'The Black Pool—the most dangerous spot on the river.'

"'Well,' said Mike, 'the gents will go there on account of the fishing being good.'

"'Very well, Mike, then you must go. But don't get too close to the weir. What a calamity it would be if anything were to happen to Mr. Sydney Horton or to Miss Grace, the handsomest pair in England. Take my humble duty to 'em Mike, and tell Mr. Sydney that I hope he's recovering his strength after the fever. And be sure and take care of 'em, Mike.'

"'Trust me for that, master,' and so saying, Deever set off.

"After he had gone, I looked about for Daft Joe, to tell him to keep an eye on the boats during Mike's absence; but Joe was nowhere to be found.

"'Off on one of his mad fits, I suppose,' said I to myself, 'I'll have to get another boy in his place.'

"I don't know why it was, but somehow, as I sat on the great lock-gates that afternoon, gazing into the cool

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water, my thoughts grew melancholy. Somehow my own words about a possible danger to Mr. Horton and his young lady, rang in my ears. The Black Pool was indeed a place to be feared.

"It was about half-a-mile from my cottage, and was a great basin, a hundred and fifty yards wide, into which the water poured in thousands of tons over a long weir, and lashed itself into boiling white foam as it plunged headlong forward for a few yards, and then eddied and swirled in fantastic form, as the strong cross-currents below, gripped it and spun it round like myriads of tops. Beyond the influence of these currents, the water formed a startling contrast, its great depth lending to it a hue like jet. From this peculiarity the pool derived its name. More than one intrepid man, venturing in his boat too near the fierce weir, had been overturned and drowned, in my experience. Perhaps it was the memory of these things that saddened my thoughts that afternoon.

"It was two or three hours later—about half-past six—when, in the gathering dusk, I was sitting outside my door enjoying a quiet pipe. Suddenly, to my astonishment, I beheld a figure, which I knew at once to be Daft Joe's, running excitedly along the tow-path. As he drew nearer, I could see his arms wildly waving. Something serious was the matter.

"'Joe! Joe! What is it?' I inquired, rising rapidly to meet him. 'Why, you've been in the river!' for I now perceived that his clothes were streaming with water. 'What is it? Speak up, can't you?'

"'Murder! Murder! That's what it is!' shrieked the demented lad, his face working convulsively. 'Murder! murder! Mr. Sydney! Miss Grace! Murder! murder! or something like it!'

"That was enough for me. I was off at his side in a moment, my brain all awhirl with wild fancies.

"We came in sight of the Black Pool, and I strained my eyes to pierce the evening gloom. Not a sight of the fishing party. But in a declivity of the bank, which we reached presently, a strange sight met my eyes.

"Four streaming figures were there. Mr. Horton, himself very white and weak, was endeavouring to restore animation to the senseless form of his young lady, while Mike Deever and Mr. Lester were wringing the wet from their outer garments.

"I didn't waste time by inquiring what had happened, or how. All my present anxiety was to get the half-drowned party to my cottage. Arrived there, young Mr. Horton, exhausted by his immersion, and overwrought by his anxiety about Miss Ford, swooned right away. The doctor whom I sent for, declared that the young lady would quickly recover, but that in view of the weak state of Mr. Horton, things might go harder with him.

"Later on I heard Mike's story of the accident. The punt, he said, had been caught in a strong current and driven close to the weir. The surging waters had poured into the boat, rapidly sinking it, and precipitating them into the water. On looking about him, Deever had discovered Mr. Lester supporting Miss Ford and making for land while Mr. Horton seemed to be swimming in the same direction. On reaching the land safely himself, however, he had been surprised to find Mr. Horton waving his arms about as though seized with the cramp, some distance from the bank. Fearing for the gentleman's safety, he was just about to plunge in to his assistance, when he observed that Daft Joe, whom previously he had not noticed, had already gone to the rescue of the helpless man.

"That was Mike Deever's version, and it sounded feasible enough. Indeed, it's astonishing how plausibly the devil always puts a case. But there was another side to the story, which was furnished me by Daft Joe—a side that threw a new and terrible light on the whole business.

"A few days before, it appeared, Mr. Lester had visited Mike Deever, and in the seclusion of the boat-house, had had a long confab with him. This Daft Joe had overheard. And what do you think the confab was about, gentlemen? Why it amounted to this: That Mr. Lester was filled with a mad desire to marry Miss Grace Ford, who was an heiress, by the way; that, consequently, he nourished a fierce and jealous hatred for his successful rival, Mr, Horton, who stood in his way to happiness and fortune. His only hope lay in removing Mr. Horton for ever from his path. To accomplish this, he was seeking Mike Deever's aid. The villain and his unscrupulous dupe then arranged their plan. They were all to go on a fishing excursion. They were to be capsized; Lester was to earn the gratitude of Miss Ford by saving her life, while Mr. Horton was to be left to his fate, his weak state of health being deemed sufficient to prevent him reaching land.

"For his assistance in this dastardly scheme, Deever was to have fifty pounds down, and a hundred pounds more on the day that Lester married Miss Ford. To insure the capsizing of the punt, Deever had cut a hole in the bottom, plugging it with wood in such a manner that a vigorous kick would displace it.

"All this dark plot, Daft Joe had discovered. Thinking in his own weak mind that if he told anybody, they would treat his story with incredulity, and take his words as indicating his wandering mind, he had hugged the secret to his breast, and simply watched events himself. From among the rushes on the bank, he had watched the party for several hours, and as I have told you, was, at the critical moment, the means of saving young Mr. Horton's life.

"On the strength of this story, the two scoundrels were arrested, the recovery of the punt, a few days after, corroborating the evidence regarding the temporarily-plugged bottom. Brought before the magistrates, Lester and Deever were remanded, pending the recovery of Mr. Horton, whose evidence, of course, was required.

"When that gentleman did recover, his grief at finding that Lester, whom he had long regarded as a friend, was really a murderous enemy, was pitiful. But he gave his evidence.

"Not to drag the story out unduly, let me say that Mike Deever, finding his case hopeless, made a clean breast of the affair. Lester, on the other hand, remained callous and insolent throughout the trial. The upshot of it all was, that Deever received five years' penal servitude, while Lester was sentenced to double that length of imprisonment.

"As for Miss Grace Ford—well, within six months she became Mrs. Sydney Horton, and to this day they are the happiest couple living. Mr. Sydney has a valet, the most faithful servant that man ever had. His name is Joe, but the village boys don't call him 'Daft Joe' now."

Kindly pass Short Stories on to your best girl.

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A FOOL BELOVED.

THERE is no doubt that the Lady Anstice was beautiful. No man might gainsay that. Yet had she the devil's own temper once her will was thwarted, and the pride of all the proud Riderwoods was hid in that white body of hers.

'Tis five years since I had, like the lovesick lad I was, stammered out the confession of my love to her—which she had doubtless guessed long since—for maids have ever a keen eye in such matters. And as I stood before her a-blushing and stammering as I say, she must needs burst out a-laughing at me for my trouble—telling me, "she could never wed with a boy such as I."

Whereupon, my timidity giving place to my anger, I told her straightly what I thought of her conduct, telling her she was a vixenish maid and much besides that I have forgot. At which she did but laugh the more. So that I vowed I would ride to the wars in Flanders.

"Prithee, do," says she.

"Ay!" says I, "that will I, and never see or think of thee more."

"Think of me," says she, looking up neath those black lashes of hers, "think of me—nay, that you needs must, despite yourself."

So, I turned to leave her, vowing I never would.

For a moment she put forth a hand as she had stayed me—then turns from me, though whether to laugh again or whether to weep, I know not.

And so it came to pass that I, Richard, the last of the Claverings, shut up the old Hall and, turning my back on Clavering village, set out for the wars, keeping my word right manfully.

Yet in one particular I failed; for, try how I would, I could nowise rid myself of the vision of my lady as I had last seen her—looking roguishly up at me, the whiles she had said:

"I must needs think of her."

And, truly, I have often enough in these last five years, and in mighty strange situations; as in the wild hurley-burley of some thundering charge, or lying out in the open, 'neath the stars—away there in Germany—I have wondered to myself whether 'twas to hide a laugh or a tear that she had turned from me that day long ago in the old rose garden at Clavering.

But that is many a long year ago, and since then the beardless youth had changed into the bronzed, fierce-moustachioed cavalier. Since then I have stormed through many a hard-fought breach, or watched the smoke-clouds roll up from many a doomed city, giving and taking shrewd blows between whiles, with cheerful spirit, as becomes a merry free companion.

Thus for the past five years have I lived, neath the banner of Gustavus the Lion, gaining the love and respect of many of these hardy soldiers of fortune, for that the long rapier I wear, doth ever rest somewhat lightly in its scabbard, and nought carrieth such respect amongst them as a quick eye and strong wrist—and there I should be now like enough, a-laughing and a-fighting with the best of them, but for a chance word let slip in my presence, the which needs sending me posting across half Germany, back to England and sleepy little Clavering; and this naught in the world but that the Lady Anstice Riderwood was about to wed a certain Sir Ralph Carnaby.

'Twas with this very thought in my mind then, that I galloped into Clavering village one evening just as the dying sun, casting great splashes of red on gable and window, sank behind the tall firs in Clavering Park.

I stood before her a-blushing and stammering. She must needs burst out laughing at me for my trouble.

So I rode up the street, casting my eyes this way and that, recognising many a remembered face, which stared at me from open doorway or lattice, as I galloped past.

Small wonder that none should recognise me after all these years, nor was I displeased, for I was minded that my lady should be the first to see me.

'Twas just on the stroke of six as I pulled up before the Clavering Arms to slack my thirst and beat the dust from my cloak and beaver. And then it was I noticed several fine chariots drawn up in the yard, and as I stand looking at them, who should come waddling towards me but old Jack Truscott, the landlord, who had known me well ere ever I went away.

"A mighty fine evening, sir," says he, glancing up into my face with never a sign of recognition.

"Ay," says I, "and you do not lack for custom methinks," and I pointed to the gaily painted coaches.

Take Short Stories home to the wife.

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"Why no," says he, his fat face wrinkling up into a smile, "and, your honour, it all comes along of having a fine woman in the neighbourhood, d'ye see."

"Ah!" says I, carelessly.

"Why, yes," says he, "there be always some fine gentlemen riding this way, d'ye see, to pay court to the Lady of Riderwood."

"Judging from those coaches, there should be enough and to spare of your fine gentlemen," says I, sourly enough.

"Why, sir," he replied, half apologetically, "to-night my lady gives a grand reception, to which all the grandest gentlemen in London are come, lords and earls and the like, d'ye see. Look ye," he went on, pointing to the nearest coach, "that belongs to Viscount Dynecourt, and that to the Earl of Strathavon, and that with the red panels and gold beading to Sir Ralph Carnaby."

"Bah! enough!" cries I, furiously, and turning to where an ostler held my horse, I leapt into the saddle and galloped out of the yard, leaving the landlord staring after me in blank amazement. Now was I more than ever determined to see my Lady Riderwood without delay. Sure, thinks I to myself, I have not come all these leagues to be put off, by a parcel of smirking court gallants, be they who they may.

So without more ado I put my horses at the wall that separated Riderhood from the road, and bounded over into the park beyond. And then it was I recollected I was in no plight for my lady's presence. For my cloak was stained and weather-beaten, my doublet worn and frayed sadly where my corselet had rubbed it, and the feather in my hat woefully faded and bedraggled.

Thus it was I reined up neath the trees, pondering, chin in hand, as to what I should do.

And sitting thus, I sudden spied a tiny wicket nigh hidden by flowering creepers and which led as I knew into the rose garden. Without more ado I dismounted and, tying my horse to a convenient branch, I opened the door and passed through.

Slowly I paced up the well-remembered paths and as I walked the sweet breath of the flowers came stealing to me putting me in mind of how my lady had looked when last I was here, and many things concerning her beside. Crossing a velvety lawn, smooth and noiseless to my tread, I came in sight of the old stone seat, bowered midst roses and coming nearer yet, whom should I see sitting lonely there but my Lady Anstice herself.

So I advanced as one that dreams, half doubting but that I shall wake to find it but a sweet, yet empty, fancy. Of a sudden she saw me, looking up for a moment with fear and wonder in her eyes. Then I saw the colour deepen in her cheek—ay, saw it go creeping down that slender white throat of hers till 'twas lost in the laces at her bosom.

"Dick!" says she, very low, as she had spoken to herself, and comes towards me with both white hands extended, "Dick," says she again, calling me by the old familiar name, "is it indeed you?"

"Ay, Anstice," says I, "'tis I, verily enough"—and hereupon I paused, hemming and hawing like the veriest fool, for now that at last I stood before her I could find no words to say, and as for telling her what I had carried in my heart all these years, and what had brought me all these leagues, for all my inches I dared no more do so than if I were the blushing lad I had been five years agone. So I stood there the veriest coward, looking into the witching face glowing warm in its rich colouring—tongue-tied.

She gave a little sigh, and turning to where a rose-bush, ablaze with fragrant colour, bordered the walk, she idly plucked a great red rose, twisting it this way and that with nervous fingers. When she faced me again the warm blood had left her cheeks and methought them somewhat white by contrast.

"So you are come back safe from the wars after all," says she carelessly enough, I thought.

"Are you glad?" says I, "have you expected me?"

"Why yes," says she readily, "of course I am glad you are safe back, 'twould have been woeful had you come without an arm or leg, yet," she went on playfully "I marvel that so gay a cavalier should come back to dear, sleepy, old Clavering, fit only for yokels and vixenish maids," and here her red lips quivered into a little smile.

"Vixenish maids," I repeated.

"Ay," says she, "have you forgot all that you said to me in this old garden five years agone?"

"Then you have not forgot what I said, Anstice?" says I eagerly, coming a step nearer. "You have not forgot——"

"That you called me a vixenish maid, nay, sir," says she sweeping me a mocking curtsey, "I have not forgot. And that because I would not listen to a foolish boy forsooth."

"Why yes," says I, "you did call me a foolish boy."

"True, but that was five years agone," says she mockingly.

"What think you of me now, Anstice?"

"Well," says she pursing up her red lips, and letting her eyes travel slowly up from my great riding boots, to the feather in my beaver, "methinks you are grown somewhat."

"Well," says I.

"Well," says she,

And so we stood looking on each other till we both fell a-laughing.

Yet was my heart bitter against all those fine lovers of hers, and against Sir Ralph Carnaby in especial.

And presently my lady spies my melancholy visage, and must needs fall a-laughing at me.

"Anstice," says I, heaving a great sigh, "I fear me you have no heart."

"Why so?" says she, holding the red rose to her smiling lips.

"What," says I, "is there aught you really care for."

"Ay, there are my flowers," says she.

"And naught besides?"

"Methinks you are grown mighty inquisitive, sir."

"'Tis a question I have come many leagues to find out—therefore, prithee, answer," says I.

"Well then," says she, her lashes a-dropping, and the colour creeping into her cheeks once more, "supposing there be—what then?"

"Do you love him very much," says I.

She was silent awhile and flashed a quick look up at me ere she answered, then:

"Ay," says she, "I fear me, I do."

"Why, then," says I, turning away with a dreary heart, "'tis true after all, and I must needs ride back to the wars."

"Go back!" cries she aghast.

Tell us of a better paper than Short Stories and we'll take it in.

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"Ay," says I, "since you love him 'tis as well I should not meet this Sir Ralph Carnaby."

"Sir Ralph Carnaby!" cries she with eyes wide with amazement—"Sir Ralph Carnaby," then with a stamp of her foot she turns from me.

"Anstice." I began, but she turned on me with flaming eyes.

"I begin to think you a greater fool than ever," says she.

"Prithee, do not leave me like this," says I, clasping her cold hand in my burning fingers to stay her by me, "do not leave me with such words on your lips; bethink you I ride back to the wars to-night, and, perchance, may never see thee more."

My sword fell clattering into the roadway.

"Why, then, go," says she angrily. "I have heard of you that you are a great fighter and soldier, yet, methinks, you are even a greater—fool."

So she leaves me standing alone in the old garden wondering at her words and mighty cast down. Well, 'twas true after all, says I, yet she need not have been so angry that I had found out. And turning to depart what should I espy lying there at my feet, but the rose she had toyed with, the rose that had felt her sweet lips.

So I picked it up and, setting it in my frayed doublet, walked away very thoughtful. And remembering the look in her eyes when she had first seen me, I felt that I was, in sooth, the greatest fool that might well be, for that I had not told her straightly what I had carried in my heart so long, and what I had come to say, despite this most cursed Carnaby.

And as I walked, thinking on these things, I came to a stop of a sudden, for, thinks I, supposing 'tis not this Sir Ralph Carnaby after all—who then should it be, and in answer comes the mad fancy that it might be I, so that I turned, half-minded, to go seek her out once more and put it to her.

"Nay!" says I, with a sigh, "let be, 'tis true enough. I am better as a soldier than a lover—'twas but a dream—let it all end here once and for all."

So I mounted, and rode away vastly miserable none the less.

'Twas the half-hour after eight as I swung into the saddle before the Clavering Arms, deaf to the expostulations of old Jack Truscott that I should tarry the night there. I rode away down the street and out of the village in the devil's own temper with all and sundry, yet with myself above all, for the opportunity I had waited for all these years was come and gone and I none the better or happier thereby. So I rode along sick at heart, my chin upon my breast, cursing my folly, and vowing never to see Clavering more. And the bright moon peeped down at me over the uplands bathing the way in her silver radiance as I rode.

Presently lifting my eyes I perceived a horse whose rider was wrapped in a great cloak, pacing slowly towards me down the middle of the road.

"Out of my way," cries I, roughly enough, "out of my way, there!"

Of which warning he took no more heed than I had been some ragged beggar, but comes slowly pacing towards me as before.

Now being in a most vile humour, as I say, what should I do, but clap my hand to my rapier, and digging in my spurs, thunder down upon him, flourishing the long blade above my head.

"Dick!" cries a sweet voice, yet with a note of alarm in it. "Dick!"

My sword fell clattering into the roadway, and I reined back my horse on his haunches.

"You, Anstice!" cries I all surprised, "you here? Methinks you should be in Riderwood along with all your fine company," says I bitterly.

"Ay, but I'm not. I run away and left them," says she with a nervous little laugh.

"Left them," I repeated, a wild hope surging up into my heart, "and why?"

"And who gave you permission to carry off my rose, sir?" says she, not heeding my question.

I glanced down to where it hung all wilted against my shabby doublet, and raised my hand to pluck it out yet chancing to look up, I read that in her sweet face I had despaired ever of beholding, and so I leaned across and caught her hand instead.

"Nay, sweeting," says I, "do but tell me why you are not among your fine company up yonder."

She gave me a quick shy glance, ere she answered, and methought she had never seemed half so lovely.

Then: "Nay, Dick, prithee do not ask me," says she bending over to fondle the glossy neck of her genet with her free hand. But this I imprisoned along with the other, clasping them both in my great fist, yet did she make no effort to withdraw them, sitting there with her sweet face a-droop like any flower.

"Tell me," says I again, "was it because you love me after all?" I felt her hands a-trembling in my grasp and when I lifted her face her eyes were bright with unshed tears.

"Oh, Dick," says she with a little smile curving her red lips, "you great, blundering, foolish Dick, to think that you should never have guessed it all those years."

Brightly the moon shone down over the uplands, and looking upon my dear lady's face, I clean forgot my former melancholy. And presently we rode back down the lane together.

"The Golden Dwarf." Don't forget it.

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THE PEGU RELIC.

By J. L. Hornibrook.

HALLOWES came to the station that night to see me off; for he said—a doubtful sort of compliment I thought—that he had nothing better to do.

I was going north for a brief spell of salmon fishing on the Solway; and as I abhor the tedium of a long railway journey I had selected a night train for choice, hoping to while away a few of the weary hours in sleep.

As luck would have it, there wasn't much of a crowd at the great London terminus, and I was fortunate enough to secure a carriage to myself. For which, in view of an undisturbed nap, I felt duly grateful.

I was leaning out of the carriage window after the doors had been closed, when Hallowes, who had stepped back a little, approached with a rather mysterious air.

"I say, old man," he whispered, with a sly glance towards the adjoining compartment, "you've got a remarkably pretty next-door neighbour in there. She's all alone, too. You couldn't do better than hop out and keep her company. She'll help you to pass away the time."

"No fear," I answered, with a stubborn faith in the virtues of sleep as a remedy for *ennui*, even when pitted against feminine charms. "I'll stay where I am."

But all the same I was interested.

Indeed I found myself craning my neck more than once, to see if by any chance I could catch a glimpse of my pretty neighbour at the window of the next carriage. But in this I was doomed to disappointment.

Just before the train started, however, she made her appearance for a moment.

The window was lowered, and out of the opening—just a few inches—came a dainty little head, and a pair of timid but most attractive eyes went round in a wistful and somewhat anxious manner.

I didn't pretend to notice her, of course; to all appearances I was deep in a conversation with Hallowes at the moment. But as she stood there, I saw out of the corner of my eye that she stole a quick, furtive glance at me, which did not appear to be wholly prompted by mere curiosity.

After that, she drew in her head, pulled up the window again, and a minute or so later we were off.

I knew there was little use in settling down to sleep for the first hour or two, and so occupied myself with my papers and magazines, of which I had laid in a fairly good stock.

From time to time, as we rattled along, my thoughts wandered to the lonely little occupant of the next compartment, and I wondered whether she found the journey wearisome, or if she had any means of killing time.

Just as I was preparing for a nap at last, a long, warning shriek came from the engine, and I knew we were rushing for the mouth of the Lichford tunnel. As there was little chance of closing an eye while the din lasted I sat up again.

The tunnel, according to what I remembered of it, was a particularly long one; and as the trains slackened speed a little just outside it generally took four minutes to get through.

To pass the time I turned my head towards the window, and kept watching the grimy brick wall as it went skimming by within a few feet of me.

"Good Heavens!"

The cry leapt from me almost before I was aware of it, for suddenly, between the window and the wall, I saw a face—a girl's face—white, palpitating with terror, piteous in its mute appeal. One glance was enough to show that it was my pretty neighbour.

Quick as lightning I dropped the window and seized hold of her. Nor was I an instant too soon; I could see by the look in her face that she was on the point of losing her strength, and shuddered to think of the awful fate which waited her in such an event.

How I managed it I cannot very well remember, but I contrived somehow to get the door open without letting go my hold of the clinging figure outside. When I had done so, I shouted to her to move clear of it and allow it to swing back. She understood, and complied instantly; I lifted her bodily into the carriage, and placed her fainting on the seat.

Not until then did I venture to glance back towards the compartment from which she had fled, though anxious enough to ascertain what had driven her to this desperate step. I saw that the door was swinging about on its hinges, but there was no sign of a pursuer anywhere. Not a soul was in sight down the whole length of the train.

By this time we had shot out of the tunnel, and I turned my whole attention to the girl. She was lying back, white and still, in the corner where I had placed her; her eyelids closed, her pretty head drooping slightly to one side. She had fainted!

For a moment or two I could only stand and gaze helplessly at her, utterly at a loss to know what to do, or how to set about reviving her. I'm afraid I am a bit of a duffer in a case of this kind, and in the present instance felt myself in a most awkward and painful dilemma.

One thing was possible, however. I noticed that her hand was raised to her throat as if she had been making a vain effort to loosen the neckband of her tight-fitting jacket, which was evidently choking her.

It was no time for ceremony. Without a moment's hesitation I unfastened the neckband myself, threw back the lapels of the jacket, and in doing so made a surprising and rather startling discovery.

Fastened around her neck, where it had been carefully concealed from sight, was a curious-looking jewelled collar, of priceless value apparently, with a massive, antique ornament, also a blaze of jewels, suspended from it. The whole gave one the impression of barbaric splendour, of having been for centuries the treasured possession of some line of dusky Eastern potentates upon whose breasts it was wont to glisten.

While I was still staring at it in blank bewilderment,

R. Norman Silver's best novel, "The Golden Dwarf."

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the girl opened her eyes, raised her drooping head; and then, as if prompted by some sudden recollection, glanced down. Instantly, with a faint cry of alarm, her trembling fingers set to work feverishly to conceal that glittering relic, while she looked at me with a sort of shrinking fear and distrust.

The situation was highly embarrassing, to say the least of it, and I hastened to explain. For some little time she appeared to regard me with uneasy doubt and suspicion, but at last I succeeded in convincing her as to the honesty of my intentions.

Still, the thought that I had lighted upon this secret of hers, appeared to weigh upon her in a strange degree. Indeed she begged of me not to reveal the fact that she had an ornament of such surpassing value in her possession; said that it had been intrusted to her to hand to a certain person up north, and that she had been strictly enjoined to exercise the utmost secrecy all through.

That the object of her mission had leaked out already, however, there could be little doubt. Someone was evidently on her track, for she told me that, just as the train entered the tunnel, a man had suddenly made his appearance at the off door of her compartment, which he must have reached from one of the carriages lower down, and she was horrified to see that he held a revolver between his teeth. Wild with terror, she got out on to the footboard and edged her way along it in the hope of attracting my attention.

The moment the train pulled up at Crewe I jumped off and called the guard. To him I gave a hasty account of the adventure in the tunnel, omitting all reference to the jewelled collar, however. A search was instantly made; but though the young lady's hand-bag, broken open and evidently hastily overhauled, was found in the next compartment, there was no sign of the ruffian who had forced an entrance from the footboard. He must have slipped off the train as it was gliding into the station.

When I returned to the girl with this report she appeared greatly relieved, and we took our seats again in the train. On resuming our journey we fell to chatting as if we had known each other for years. The young lady informed me that her name was Miss Mowbray, and that she was bound for Carlisle, at which station, as it so happened, I myself intended to alight.

We got on so well together, and the time passed so pleasantly in chatting to her, that I by no means regretted having forfeited my sleep. Indeed, I was fast coming round to the belief that there was nothing like agreeable society for whiling away the tedium of a long train journey, especially when I looked out through the carriage window and found, to my surprise, that we were already within a few miles of Carlisle.

And at this point I noticed that my companion began to grow restless and fidgety, occasionally losing the thread of the conversation altogether. She had been informed, it appears, that a gentleman would meet her at the station on her arrival. He was quite a stranger to her, but she was told to look out for a tall man with a black moustache, and wearing a lemon-coloured glove on his left-hand. By these tokens—especially the glove—she was to know him, and I think her anxiety was caused by an uneasy doubt lest he should fail to turn up.

If such was the case her fears proved to be well grounded, for when we alighted from the train not a soul came forward to meet her. I looked around in vain for the tall man with the black moustache and lemon-coloured glove. There was no trace of him anywhere.

Miss Mowbray's alarm and distress increased every moment. I lingered on at her side until the train had steamed away again, and the platform was practically deserted, but still we waited in vain.

At last, when it became evident that the tall man had failed to keep his appointment, the girl turned to me in an appealing manner.

"What am I to do?" she said, struggling with her rising tears.

"Do you know anyone here?" I asked.

"Not a soul!"

Here was a nice predicament! For a young girl to be stranded at a strange railway-station in the small hours of the morning, with such a valuable article as the jewelled collar about her, too, was certainly a most unpleasant and awkward plight.

The only thing I could do was to see her to an hotel, leaving word with the railway people where she was to be found.

When I made this suggestion she fell in with it at once, for, in her perplexity and distress, she seemed to look to me entirely for guidance.

R. Norman Silver's

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Will commence in *SHORT STORIES* on 25th June.

TELL YOUR FRIENDS AND WARN YOUR NEWSAGENT. THERE'S GOING TO BE A RUSH FOR IT. . . .

We left the station together; but just as we got outside a high dog-cart dashed up, and out sprang the tall man with the lemon-coloured glove. He looked first at Miss Mowbray, and then shot a keen, searching glance at me. Taking the girl aside, he whispered to her hurriedly for some seconds, and the next moment, without giving her even the chance of holding out her hand, bundled her into the dog-cart and drove off. She had barely time to turn her head and wave an adieu to me before they were out of sight, leaving me quite staggered by the sudden manner in which she had been snatched from under my wing.

"Cool, upon my word!" I growled, as I began to recover from this set-back.

"Very," responded a voice behind me.

I whisked round, and there stood a shrewd-looking little man, who must have been concealed in the shadow of the station buildings the whole time. I remembered having seen him prowling up and down the platform when the train arrived, and noticed that he had scanned

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my companion and myself very narrowly every time he passed.

He now began to make tentative inquiries regarding the young lady, and, being slightly in a muddle about the whole thing, I answered rather at random. Taken off my guard in this way, I told him of the adventure in the tunnel, and let slip something concerning the jewelled collar before I knew where I was.

But the next second I was recalled to myself by the extraordinary and inexplicable conduct of the stranger.

"Idiot!" he exclaimed—in what connection I'm sure I don't know—and took to his heels on the spot.

Well, really I was prepared for anything after that; As I stooped for my bag I vaguely wondered if the good people of Carlisle had all suddenly taken leave of their senses, that they should go flying away in this singular manner.

I went to an hotel, intending to rest there for the day and take a slow train on to the border in the evening. As for my strange experiences since leaving London, I put them resolutely on one side, for I had no desire to get further entangled in a maze of conjecture.

In the afternoon, while I was busy with my fishing tackle, I was informed that someone was inquiring for me at the bar of the hotel. I resigned myself and requested the caller to be shown up, feeling sure that some fresh surprise would be sprung upon me in the course of the next few minutes.

And there was!

The door opened, and in burst the little man who had parted from me so unceremoniously in the morning.

"I've got it!" he cried, evidently in a state of great jubilation.

"Got what?" I asked.

"The Pegu relic, of course," he answered. "I was after the dog-cart like a shot on my bicycle, and caught our friends up at a little inn out in the country. That fellow Mostyn, or Henshaw, showed fight, as I thought he would, but I had brought a couple of others with me and we soon made him knuckle under. He was just in the act of stowing away the relic, which the girl had been ordered to hand him, when we broke in and nabbed him."

When I could get in a word, I endeavoured to explain that all this was high Dutch to me, and requested him to put it into intelligent English.

He started off by explaining that he was a detective, as I had partly guessed already, and, in common with all the police throughout the country had been made acquainted, privately, with the extraordinary theft of the Pegu relic from the British museum.

"This relic," he went on, "was brought home years ago from Pegu, where it was found adorning the neck of one of the hideous native idols. Since then it has reposed snugly in its glass case at the British Museum. The greatest care was taken of it, not only on account of its immense value, but because it was supposed to be of very ancient design.

"One fine morning, a couple of weeks ago, it was suddenly discovered that this priceless relic had vanished, and in its place lay a worthless sham, an exact facsimile of it. Suspicion turned upon Mrs. Stanhope Mostyn, who was cutting a dash in London at the time, for it appears that she had got on friendly terms with one of the officials, and had induced him to open the case so that she might inspect the jewels more closely.

"Nothing was said about the robbery at the moment—it did not get into the papers even I believe—for it was thought best to keep the matter dark lest the thief or thieves should become alarmed. The affair was placed in the hands of the smartest Scotland Yard detectives, and private information sent to all the police-stations throughout the country.

"Inquiries soon showed that Mrs. Stanhope Mostyn was nothing more than a clever adventuress, who had been at this sort of game before under a different name. The police were hot on her track, and, being hard pressed, she must have hit on the plan of sending the relic up here, where that fellow I arrested to-day, who is supposed to be either her brother or husband, was waiting to receive it.

"There must have been one other man in the business—the rascal who attempted to rob the girl in the train. I suppose he was in the secret, and it occurred to him that he might as well collar the plunder on the way, and dispose of it for his own entire benefit. Probably he would have succeeded, too, but Mrs. Mostyn, who is a sharp one, took good care the relic should be concealed upon the young lady's person, instead of being placed in her hand-bag, making up some plausible yarn about its being a family heirloom which she wished delivered to her brother in hot haste.

"It appears that this fellow Mostyn—or Henshaw, as he sometimes styles himself—has been in this neighbourhood for some time past, lying low at a quiet little inn out in the country. It was his intention, no doubt, to remain on there for the present, quietly abstract the jewels from the relic at his leisure, and get them off to the continent in small batches. Well," he concluded, rubbing his hands gleefully, "I spoilt his little game, you see, and there'll be a tidy sum dropping in one of these days from the museum authorities in the shape of a reward, or I'm greatly mistaken."

"And the girl—Miss Mowbray?" I asked.

He sobered down at once.

"Ah!" he said, "it's a bit rough on her, poor thing. There's no doubt in the world that she knew nothing of all this tricky business. She was simply the dupe of that very clever person, Mrs. Stanhope Mostyn, who made a tool of her when she wished to avoid running the gauntlet through the London police herself.

"From what the young lady tells me, it seems that she was engaged some time ago to act as Mrs. Mostyn's companion, whom she always looked upon as a fashionable Society woman. Of course she was greatly distressed when she found out the real state of the case, for it came on her quite as a shock."

"And where is she now?" I inquired.

"At the police-station," the detective answered.

"She told me that you were the only person she knew in the place and I started off at once to find you. She will come out of the business all right, of course; in fact we have wired to Scotland Yard, and if her story is confirmed, as I have no doubt it will be, we have no desire to detain her or cause her further unpleasantness. Meanwhile, you might come along and see what you can do for her."

I did come along, and without a moment's delay either. That same evening I had the satisfaction of escorting her to the railway-station and seeing her safely into the London train, promising to call upon her immediately I returned to town myself.

I kept my promise, too. It was the first of many subsequent visits, and—but that is quite another story.

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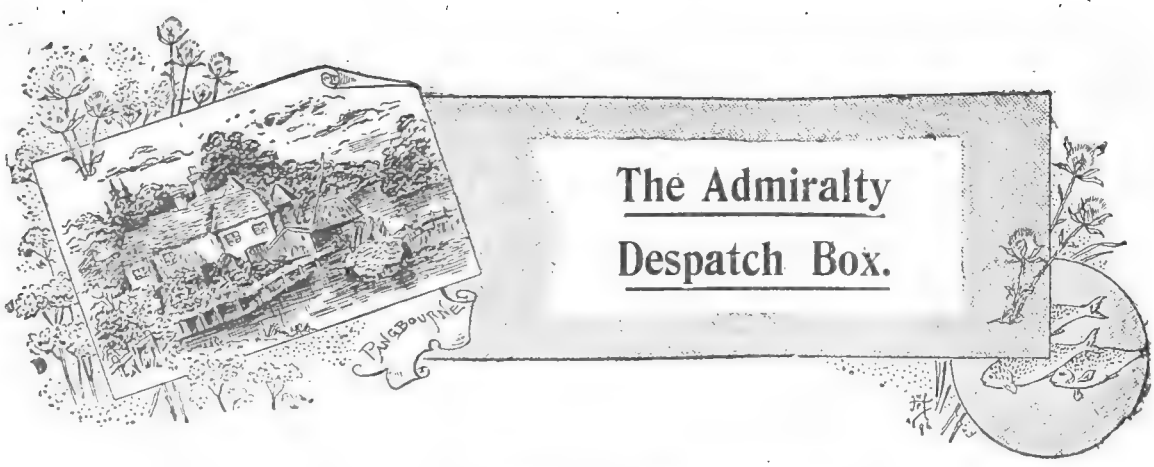

The Admiralty Despatch Box.

ALTHOUGH I am now at the head of a big Salvage Association, and can afford to take it easy on shore, I commenced my career under water, if I may put it so; that is to say as an ordinary diver.

Most people seem to have a very hazy idea as to the scope of a diver's duties.

They imagine that his work is confined solely to laying the foundation stones of piers and bridges, exploring sunken wrecks, and things of that kind. But that's not all of it, by a long way.

I have been called upon in my time to go down upon very curious errands—private matters, most of them. Though you wouldn't think it, I have unravelled more mysteries, the key to which lay at the bottom of the sea, than many a police officer on land.

One of the queerest experiences I ever had in this way was when I sought to recover the Admiralty Despatch Box, upon the finding of which a man's life depended—ay, and a girl's too, for ought I know.

I was down on the south coast at the time, working at one of the big seaports there, which was also an important naval station. There were two other divers on the job with me, and we generally took it by turns to make a descent.

One afternoon I knocked off pretty early, for the flood tide interfered with our work.

When I got back to my lodgings I was feeling a bit done up—no one knows how it takes it out of a man to toil for hours under water—and so flung myself on the couch in my little sitting room.

I had just dropped off into a comfortable snooze when there was a tap at the door, and my landlady made her appearance with an apology for disturbing me. She proceeded to inform me that someone had called, who wished to see me very particularly, and was waiting below at the moment.

"Who is it, Mrs. Bowles?" I asked in surprise; for with the exception of my mates, I hardly knew a soul in the place.

"A young lady," she answered with a smirk.

A young lady! The deuce it was! Now, what in the name of all that was wonderful could a young lady want with me.

I didn't stop to puzzle the thing out just then, however, I fingered my tie to see if it was in the proper place, hitched my coat straight, and requested Mrs. Bowles to show her up.

I heard their footsteps on the stairs, and the next second there tripped into my room one of the prettiest and most winsome creatures it was ever my luck to set eyes upon. You could have knocked me down with a feather, as the saying is.

But I soon pulled myself together. One glance was enough to show me that the girl was in sore trouble of some kind.

The odd part of it was, she looked at me in a peculiar, appealing sort of way, as if I was the one person upon earth who could help her out of her difficulty.

I hastened to place a chair for her, but beyond the fact that her name was Miss Helen Minton I was unable to learn very much from her at first. She sat with her head turned away towards the window, and I could see the tears glistening in her eyes, poor girl. Then, when she had choked down a little sob, she faced round again, and poured out all her trouble. This was the strange story she had to tell me:

It appears that she was engaged to a young fellow named Mark Rainsford, a clerk in the naval dockyard, whom she had known for a good many years. They were to have been married very shortly; everything was prepared; a snug little home ready, and all that kind of thing. And then just as their happiness seemed to be within reach, a sudden blow fell upon them which bid fair to wreck both their lives. It had pretty well done that for poor Rainsford already.

From what the girl went on to tell me I gathered that the young fellow's duties chiefly consisted in conveying important and secret documents, which could not be intrusted to an ordinary messenger, from the dockyard to the Admiral's office. For this purpose he had to cross a pretty wide strip of water. If he was likely to be detained long at the opposite side, as was often the case, he sent the boat back to the dockyard, giving instructions that another should come across at a certain hour.

A few days before, he left the dockyard early in the afternoon for the Admiralty office. He was to bring back with him certain highly important papers—secret plans and things of that kind—about which he was cautioned to exercise the utmost care. Everybody concerned knew that there were plenty of foreign spies knocking about the place, who would give a lot to get hold of those documents.

At the Admiralty Office Rainsford was kept waiting

"The Golden Dwarf" begins the week after next.

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until the evening. The Admiral himself placed the papers in a despatch box, which he locked with his own hands. It could not be opened again until it reached the superintendent of the dockyard, who had a duplicate key.

As it was late enough already, and young Rainsford had a good way to go when he came off duty, he hurried down to the landing-stage without a moment's delay. The night was very dark, with a thin, drizzling rain falling, so that he could hardly see a yard before him.

He found his boat waiting for him all right at the slip where he usually landed. He jumped into the stern, placed the despatch box on the seat beside him, and the men shoved off at once.

They had got about half-way across, when Rainsford, who had kept his head down on account of the drizzle, suddenly looked up to find that the men had ceased rowing. Before he could make out what they were up to, the fellow nearest to him reached under the seat, picked up a heavy piece of wood, and sprang at him.

The meaning of the whole thing flashed upon the poor young fellow then in an instant. He had fallen into a trap. This was not his boat, though one very like it, nor were these men from the dockyard. It was the despatch box they were after!

His one thought at that critical moment was to save those valuable papers from falling into their hands, no matter what else came of it. Without an instant's delay he seized the box and dropped it overboard. Even as he did so the senses were knocked out of him by a crashing blow on the head.

The rascals, being frustrated in their attempt to obtain those secret plans, must have pitched the unfortunate clerk into the tide, for a little later he was picked up a good way lower down, and conveyed to the naval hospital.

It was some considerable time before the surgeons could bring him round, and even then he was too weak to give a satisfactory account of himself.

Next morning, however, the dockyard officials arrived to question him. It appears that a boat had been sent across for him as usual on the previous evening; but on landing, the men were directed by someone in the uniform of a petty officer—it was never clearly ascertained who this person was—to go round to another slip, where they had waited in vain for hours.

Rainsford told his story, but as he watched the faces of those officials his heart sank within him.

A sudden and sickening fear gripped him. Would this extraordinary tale of his be believed? Might it not be supposed that he had purloined the box himself, knowing that he could put his own price on the contents to any foreign government, and invented that yarn about the strange boat?

The injury to his head could easily be made out to have been self-inflicted; after which he had dropped into the tide and floated down until he was picked up. This sort of thing had been done often enough before.

And, as a matter of fact, that is precisely what was supposed. His story was simply ridiculed.

The thing was looked upon as preposterous. The naval authorities refused to accept his account of the affair; not a soul believed in him except the girl to whom he was engaged—Miss Helen Minton.

"He now lies in the hospital in a dreadful state," she told me, when she had reached this point. "The thought of having this terrible suspicion hanging over his head is killing him. Even if he recovers, disgrace and ruin await him, for he has no means of establishing his innocence. He vows that he never will face the shame of it, that he would rather put an end to himself at once than live to be called a mercenary traitor. And, oh! if anything should happen to him——"

She broke down there, poor girl, put her hands to her face, and sobbed aloud.

I felt uncommonly queer about the throat myself; for somehow I had taken it into my head that Rainsford's story was true, every word of it, and I knew what misery it would cause these two young people if he wasn't cleared of suspicion.

I let the girl have her cry out, thinking it might do her good, and then got to business straight away.

"You want me to go down and try to fish up that despatch box?" I said.

"Oh! if you would only be so good!" she said, giving me a grateful look. "There is no other way of proving Mark's innocence."

"I'll have a try, at any rate," I replied. "But I don't want you to count too much upon my success. You must remember that there will be great difficulty in ascertaining the exact spot where it was dropped overboard. And unless I can obtain some idea as to that, I might prowl about down there for days without coming across a trace of the box."

But she wouldn't hear of such a thing as non-success. When she saw I took the matter up so readily, and moreover that I believed in her Mark, it seemed to lift a load from her mind.

Upon my promising to see the young fellow at the hospital that same evening, and to make the attempt the first thing in the morning, he couldn't thank me enough. She went away with a lightened heart.

Later on I called at the hospital and was allowed to see young Rainsford.

Poor fellow, he was indeed in a bad way, worrying himself to death about this wretched business. But I liked his look; he had a good honest face, and it made me all the more determined to pull him out of the hole if it lay in my power.

When I told him I was going down next morning to hunt for the despatch box, he just took my hand in both of his, looking up at me with the tears in his eyes.

Of course he could give me little information as to the spot where I was likely to find it. Considering the darkness of the night and all the other circumstances combined, it was impossible for him to state the exact position of the boat at the time. He gave me a general idea as to the direction in which they were heading and a few other particulars; and with that I had to be satisfied. I explained the whole matter to our boss that night, and he readily placed a diver's barge at my disposal for the following day. Then, when I had made all necessary arrangements, I went home and turned in.

Early next morning the barge was towed down to the scene, and anchored about midway between the dockyard and the Admiralty landing stage opposite. I made the descent, prowled about the bottom for a couple of hours, but had come up empty-handed.

Several times during the day I renewed the attempt, shifting my ground on each occasion, but always with the same result. Not a trace of the despatch box could I find anywhere.

The evening closed in at last, and I was forced to give up my fruitless search.

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I felt terribly put out about it. Somehow I hadn't the heart to go back and confess my failure to that anxious girl who was waiting and watching for me. I spoke to the three men with me and induced them to stow themselves away somewhere on the barge for the night, so that I could make one last attempt in the morning.

It came on a very cloudy night, dark as pitch, but without a breath of wind. Though my companions were sleeping soundly enough, I couldn't close an eye myself.

About midnight I went forward and sat down in the bows for a smoke. The strange stillness, the dense darkness that shut me in, and the lapping of the water

"I have gone down upon very curious errands."

against the sides of the barge seemed to throw me into a half-dreamy state, which lasted a long time.

Suddenly—it must have been close upon one o'clock—I was aroused by a strange sound; the sound of muffled oars. Crouching down, my eyes went groping through the blackness on every side.

I have uncommonly sharp sight, trained to seeing things in the dark, and so after a time I made out a small boat with one man in it some distance below us. The fellow, whoever he was, seemed to be pulling round and round in a circle, and every minute or so I caught the glimmer of a light over the side.

Presently he ceased rowing and there was a soft splash, as if an anchor or heavy stone had been dropped cautiously overboard.

For several minutes he sat perfectly motionless, his head towards the barge, as if to make sure that no one was stirring there. Then he crouched down in the boat, and I couldn't make out what he was at.

Suddenly he raised himself again, and there loomed between me and the sky something like a big metal pot. Great Heavens!—a diver!

I tumbled to the thing at once. This was one of the rascals who had trapped young Rainsford and tried to relieve him of his papers. He knew the exact spot, of course—probably had marked it with a line and a piece of cork. And now, having got hold of a Fleuss diving-dress, which contains a reservoir for air at the back and enables a man to remain under water for the best part of an hour, he was going down to try to recover the despatch box.

Though he tried to conceal the light, I saw that he was armed with a lantern. The instant he was out of sight I flew to the stern, aroused my companions, and got into my diving-dress in record time. Then I was over the side after my unknown friend.

I had noted well the position of the boat, and groped my way in that direction. As I floundered along, for I daren't bring down my lantern, I caught a watery gleam of light in front. I felt pretty sure of my man now.

With my heart in my mouth I cautiously approached, and saw the fellow groping about in every direction. I got as near to him as I dared; then stood still and watched him.

He moved forward a little, and the next minute his hand shot out eagerly towards something before him. It was the despatch box!

As he bent down I stepped quickly up from behind; and just as he was in the act of clutching it, I grabbed him by the shoulder.

Now, if you will just put yourself in that man's place—down there in the silence and solitude of those murky depths, in the middle of the night, too—and you suddenly felt yourself grabbed from behind, I daresay you won't wonder that the fright seemed to kill this fellow outright.

He never looked round; he just fell forward on his face as if poleaxed.

Casting off the rope that communicated with his boat, I relieved him of his lantern, took him by one of the limp arms and dragged him back towards the barge. When we got him on board and whipped his helmet off, we found that he was in a dead faint.

Next morning I handed the despatch box over to the naval authorities, and my prisoner with it. He proved to be a man named Hammond, who, though not personally known to Rainsford, was employed in another department of the dockyard. He had worked the whole thing in conjunction with the agent of a foreign government, with whom he had long been in communication.

Rainsford was promptly reinstated, of course; and as the dockyard officials must have felt rather sheepish over the business they tried to make it up to him by giving him a step.

And before I left the South coast I was present at his marriage with Miss Helen Minton, where everybody, the young coupled especially, made a great fuss over me.

You will be fascinated by "The Golden Dwarf."

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THE PARSON'S HAT.

JOSHUA GRIMSHAW noiselessly pushed open the outer door of his counting-house, upon which was inscribed the legend, "Office Hours, nine to six," and stood for a few moments regarding his clerks, who, all oblivious to his presence, were indulging in a little idle banter preliminary to applying themselves to their books.

Then, after taking in every detail of the scene, he signified his proximity by a sarcastic "Ahem!" The effect was electrical. With a sardonic smile on his hard face he noted the sudden spurt of industry. Taking out his watch, he glared around the office. It was fifteen minutes after nine, and the chief ledger clerk's place was still vacant.

"Nephew," he snapped to the young cashier, "intimate to Tottell when he condescends to appear that I wish to speak to him." And he stamped up to his sanctum.

Five minutes later the trembling book-keeper entered his presence. Careworn and prematurely old he faced his master. For nigh on twenty years he had slaved at the desk for a miserable pittance at the best, of a man who regarded him and his fellows as so many machines which should add to his hoard.

Close-fisted and exacting, Joshua Grimshaw spared not himself or others. He was a man in whose composition was no grain of sentiment. Wealth was his god, his life, his all.

"You wanted me, I believe, sir," faltered the clerk.

Joshua fixed him with a piercing glance.

"I did, sir, and I see you know why," he returned grimly. "This is the third time you have broken the rules of this establishment. Leniency evidently is wasted upon you. You must be taught a lesson. After this week I shall not require your services. Silence!" he thundered as the man started forward beseechingly, "I want no excuses. You can go."

"For God's sake, sir," burst out the clerk imploringly, "don't turn me off like this! My wife is ill—I could not leave her——"

"I want no excuses, sir," snarled Joshua. "You heard what I said. Go; send my nephew to me."

Poor Tootell stumbled out of the room, a stony look of despair in his eyes.

A few moments later, Ned Summers, the young cashier, entered his uncle's presence. His face was flushed with indignation and undisguised contempt.

"Uncle," he burst out hotly, "you surely will not do this injustice. The man is distraught with trouble. His wife is a chronic invalid. It is cruel—inhuman!"

"Don't presume on your position, sir," snapped Grimshaw. "This business is mine, I believe? The man is unsatisfactory. You will fill his place."

"Uncle, I protest——"

"You are a fool, sir. Get to your desk."

The young man clenched his hands and bit his lips to curb the angry retort on his tongue.

"Very well, sir," he said bitterly, and turned on his heel.

"Come here, sir," said the old man brusquely. "What is the meaning of this letter? How dare this fellow, Moseley, presume to invite himself here?"

Ned Summers glanced at the paper in his uncle's hand.

"Ah, yes," he said, "Mr. Moseley informed me that he purposed seeing you. I understand that he is coming this morning."

"Ah, I see," returned Joshua sneeringly. "But if you think his visit likely to influence me, you and he are very much mistaken. The girl—this pauper parson's daughter—is no fitting match for you. I have other views with regard to you."

"Uncle," returned the young man, "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but in this I can brook no interference. Ethel Moseley is the woman I shall marry, happen what may."

"You will not make such an egregious ass of yourself," fumed the old man. "Understand me clearly. If you run counter to my wishes in this matter I disown you utterly. Not a penny of my money shall you have."

With a gesture of impatience the young man left the room.

Joshua Grimshaw took off his hat, and laying it on the table beside him, applied himself to his correspondence. Rapidly digesting the contents, he pencilled on the margin of each the gist of his reply, and threw the letters into a basket for his typist. With a scowl he tore into shreds a pitiful appeal for charity.

The door opened, and the boy announced "The Reverend Cuthbert Moseley."

"Show him in," he snapped, and the visitor entered with a cheery word of greeting on his lips.

"Excuse me one moment," said Joshua coldly, ignoring the extended hand. "Take a seat."

Cuthbert Moseley flushed, and a shadow of annoyance obliterated for a moment the habitual smile on his kindly face. Placing his silk hat on the table beside the others, he sat down and awaited Grimshaw's pleasure.

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"Now, parson," said Joshua at length, swinging round in his chair. "Have the goodness to remember I'm a busy man. What is it—subscriptions?" And he buttoned up his coat significantly.

"Still the same old Joshua," said Moseley, smiling at the action. "And what if it is—subscriptions?"

"Only this," returned Grimshaw curtly, "you'll waste my time and your own. Philanthropic faddists get no encouragement from me. By the laws of this land I am compelled to pay rates to help support a lazy set of loafers who never knew what an honest day's work was in all their wasted lives, and by so doing I perform more than my duty. Poverty is the result of extravagance and idleness. I countenance neither."

"It would be a bad look out indeed for our orphans and widows if all rich men thought as you do, Joshua Grimshaw," returned the parson. "But, thank God, they don't."

"Pshaw!" ejaculated Joshua impatiently. "I hate cant. What is your business?"

"What a misanthropical old curmudgeon you have become, Joshua," said the outspoken clergyman. "However, it is not subscriptions. I want to speak with you on a more important matter. To be brief—you are doubtless aware your nephew, an estimable young man, is desirous of marrying my daughter. He informs me you are strongly averse to the alliance. I have come to ask you why?"

"Your candour is commendable, parson," returned Joshua caustically. "I will be equally brief. As you are probably aware, he is my sole relative. All that I have will be his one day providing he conforms to my wishes, and—I do not desire him to marry your child."

"What, Joshua, does the past still rankle, then?"

"Aye, as it ever will to my dying day," returned Grimshaw bitterly. "Thirty years ago you took from me the only woman I ever cared for in this world, blighting my life and making me the misanthropical curmudgeon you say I am. If there was any scrap of human kindness in my heart, 'twas killed then. You cannot tell the bitterness that has been mine in all those years, Cuthbert Moseley. I cursed when I knew the child was given to you. I was glad when your wife, who should have been mine, was taken from you. Do you think, man, that I will allow my brother's son to marry any spawn of yours? Rather would I see him dead——"

"Stop!" commanded the parson, towering above him with arm upraised. "Stop, I say!"

And Grimshaw, clenching the arms of his chair, glared up at him wildly, choked with the impotent passion that consumed him.

The parson's hand fell to his side.

"Heaven forgive you, Joshua Grimshaw," he said. He turned for the door. "I perceive it would be useless to talk further with you. But you will please understand that the lives of my girl and the boy shall not be wrecked if I can help it. He loves her, and, if he will marry her, he shall, whether you approve or not. I have nothing more to say to you."

The door closed behind him, and Joshua Grimshaw sprang to his feet with a burst of mirthless laughter.

"Marry her!" he cried. "By my life, parson, we shall see!"

He fell back in his chair and glowered around him. Then, grasping his pen, he endeavoured to concentrate his attention on the matters before him. But it was futile, and, with an oath, he jerked the chair back and put forth his hand for his hat.

The touch of it seemed strangely unfamiliar to his head. He took it off and glared at it savagely.

"Hang the parson," he shouted furiously. "The fool has taken my hat!"

Jamming it on viciously, he went forth to his solitary lunch. Looking neither to right nor left he made his way to his club, and strode towards the corner he usually occupied. The sad-eyed waiter hastened to relieve him of his coat, for he knew "Old Grim" brooked no neglect.

"Thank you, Spink," said Joshua.

The man stared. For ten years he had waited upon this grumpy member without ever once receiving a word of thanks. Joshua looked up at him inquiringly.

"You don't look very well, Spink," he said brusquely. "You want change."

The anxious-faced waiter dropped his napkin in surprise.

"Yessir," he stammered, pulling himself together, "I could d-do with some ch-change."

Joshua, thinking the man was having a cut at his niggardliness, scowled. Then, as he glanced up at his lugubrious face, he was taken with an irresistible desire to laugh. Somehow, he knew not why, he felt highly pleased with himself. The luncheon proved more enjoyable than ever he remembered before.

Suddenly he bethought him that never once had he offered a tip to the woe-begone Spink, and the whim took him, causing him to smile, that he would try the experiment just to enjoy the effect.

"Spink," he said abruptly, "here's five shillings for you."

The man opened and closed his mouth spasmodically, unable to speak a word.

Joshua laughed hilariously, and strode away into the smoke-room. Dropping into a comfortable lounge-chair he lay back and watched the smoke wreaths curling up from his cigar.

Smoking he generally looked upon as a wilful extravagance. His present frame of mind was most extraordinary. The evolution of his ideas was strangely incomprehensible to him. For the life of him he could not understand his sudden burst of generosity, nor why he should prefer to sit quiet and smoke instead of returning to his desk and business.

And yet, after all, there was something decidedly pleasant in thinking of the look of gratitude in the eyes of the poor waiter.

He took the parson's hat off his head, and gazed at it with a whimsical look of disgust. He could not help noticing that it had seen its best days.

"Moseley always was a fool," he muttered, "giving away what he wanted himself. That's no charity. He's as poor as a church mouse, and always will be."

Mechanically he replaced the hat on his head, and, as he did so, something seemed to whisper in his ear: "What do you know of charity, Joshua Grimshaw?"

He started up and looked round suspiciously, half-fearfully. He could have sworn someone had spoken. Save for one man, who was buried behind a newspaper in the far corner, he had the room to himself. He puffed at his cigar savagely.

"What can old Grim, the misanthrope, know of charity?" continued the still, small voice. "Exacting his full pound of flesh so that he may but add to his

Take Short Stories home to the wife.

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useless pile of gold; grinding his poorer brethren into the dust; sweating his miserable servants to satisfy his insatiable greed. What can the grasping miser know of love or charity?"

He fidgeted restlessly in his chair.

"What the dickens is coming over me?" he muttered disgustedly.

He got up and went into the street.

A miserable, decrepit woman was shuffling along the gutter quavering an old-time ballad. With a start his memory flew back to the days of his boyhood. The song was one his mother had been wont to sing. Turning back with a sudden impulse, he gave the beggar a shilling. The woman poured out a torrent of incoherent thanks. Half-ashamedly, he strode away.

Reaching his office he stole quietly upstairs. Within he could hear the voices of his clerks, and he paused to listen.

"Tootell, old man, I'm sorry," someone was saying. "What shall you do?"

"God knows!" returned the other despairingly. "Turned off like a dog after twenty years service. I dare not tell Lizzie. It would kill her."

"He's a devil," said the first speaker, "a pitiless, cold-blooded devil."

Joshua Grimshaw started as if he had been stung. With a set, white face he made his way to his room and threw himself wearily into a chair.

This then was what his servants thought of him. "A pitiless, cold-blooded devil!" The words rankled in his brain. Rapidly affixing his signature to a score of letters, he threw down his pen and gazed blankly before him.

"A just indictment," he whispered hoarsely. "My God, a just indictment!"

His brain conjured up before him a record of his cheerless existence for the past thirty years. The face of she whom he had loved, as he remembered her in the days when the world had been glad, floated before him.

"How different everything might have been if only she had taken pity," he moaned.

The memory of that night when, with tears standing in her eyes, she had told him there was someone else, brought a cruel pang to his heart.

"Joshua," came her well-remembered voice over the flight of years, "I'm sorry, but it never can be. You must forget. No, no, don't talk so, you hurt me. It is not manly. Some other woman, more worthy than myself, shall make you forget. Be a man, Joshua."

The vision faded, and his head sank forward dejectedly on his breast.

"Be a man, Joshua," came the whisper. "You can make someone happy. The lad——"

His face lit up with a sudden resolution. Brushing the mist from his eyes, he touched the electric button before him.

"Send Tootell in to me," he said.

Presently the man entered,

"Tootell," he said humbly, "you will forgive me if I was harsh this morning. Please forget what I said to you. And, Tootell"—he fumbled in his pocket-book—"I hear you are in trouble. This small gift may help you."

The man stumbled forward with tears of gratitude in his eyes.

"There, that's all right," said Joshua smilingly. "I understand, my lad. Mr. Summers will have something pleasant to communicate to you on Saturday. Send him here, will you?"

The young man strode into the room.

"Ned," said Joshua jocularly, "that rogue of a parson took my best silk hat and left me this disreputable tile in its place. Look at it. Now do you think he would be offended if I presented him with a new one?"

His nephew stared, struck dumb with genuine astonishment. Then his face broadened into a smile.

"It is a bit antiquated, isn't it?" he laughed.

"Here, you go out and get him a Christie," said Joshua, "and when you see him to-night—I suppose you will, eh, you young dog?—just give it to him with my compliments, and tell him I shall be pleased to see him and his daughter at dinner to-morrow night at seven. You might look in, too."

"Uncle!" burst out the young man amazedly.

"You know, I rather think I'll keep the parson's old hat, Ned," said Joshua, putting it on once more. "How do you think it suits me?"

"Admirably!" exclaimed Ned. "You look another man in it."

"Egad, I feel it!" laughed Joshua. "I do, indeed."

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CHAPTER XIII. (*continued*).

HOATHLEY took his lips from his flask and grinned an evil grin.

"My dear young friend, Swinley Tasker," he said in his mock-pompous manner, "don't you see that we are inseparably bound up together, and that one cannot afford to round on the other? You know enough to hang me already, and I—well, I can do the same by you; for though you were not present personally, you yet were an accessory both before and after the very forcible fact that overtook the gentle Michael in this room the other night. No, my boy; we are in the same boat, and must sink or swim together. That ought to be enough security that I shan't baulk you."

Marion came nigh to fainting, so patent was the meaning of the vile whispers that reached her.

That deadly smooth-spoken wretch on the other side of the dark hall was the actual murderer of her father, and was in a fair way to become her own.

"Well," said Tasker, "so long as you understand that I'm to have a fair half, whether it's to-night or twenty years hence, you must work it out your own way."

"That's a wise youth," replied the elder scoundrel, "and now, instead of fooling about with arguments that may be quite uncalled for, we had better get to work."

As he spoke Marion, watching breathlessly, saw him unfold a roll of oilcloth and produce a couple of portable crowbars, the joints of which he proceeded to screw together, thus forming a brace of highly effective tools. Then, while the trembling girl shrank back further into the darkness, Hoathley, beckoning to Tasker, made for the door of the sitting room.

Together they came out into the hall, and paused close to the door of Marion's refuge. She felt that the slightest movement would betray her, and as it was, a sudden impulse might prompt them to invade the disused sitting-room.

"The question is," whispered Hoathley, "whether I first exercise a little gentle pressure on my fair relative's door, or whether we start by pulling down dear Michael's labour of love in the cellar. Our look round to-night has confirmed my impression that the money is nowhere else—unless it be in the occupied bedroom."

"Let us start on the strong room, then," said Tasker, "I would much rather you settled the other job by yourself, while I am seeing to the cash. We don't need the key. We can just as easily knock the place down from the outside, and there's no fear of her hearing us, away at the back and underground."

So they did not yet know, Marion thought, that the strong-room had already been tried and found wanting.

What would happen when the discovery was made? Even as she wondered, it seemed that Hoathley agreed with his accomplice's proposition, for they both disappeared from the range of her vision, not, as the diffused light or the lantern told her, up the stairs, but underneath them, in the direction of the cellar door.

Then the hall relapsed into utter darkness, and Marion knew that they were descending into the black depths below.

With a sigh of relief she allowed her cramped limbs to relax, and endeavoured to collect her dazed senses into a plan of action.

The paralysing effect of Hoathley's murderous playfulness had numbed her to the marrow while she listened, but with the cessation of his hateful tones her natural fortitude returned.

"If only there were a lock on the cellar door I could catch them like rats in a trap," she thought to herself; "but it is useless to attempt it without. I must make my escape while they are below, and try and get help before they leave the premises."

Gliding from her refuge Marion once again approached the front door, and was about to undo the bolts when a sudden impulse took possession of her. The pursuit of Zambra, she gathered, had been in some way checked by the criminals; why should she not play the part of a detective herself! Astonished by the discovery of the demolished strong-room, they might let fall some hint of their plans which would tend to their capture. She would creep to the top of the cellar stairs and listen before she finally fled from the house. There would be the less risk, because the men would probably overhaul the ruins of the brickwork before returning to search for her. The idea took such hold of Marion that she proceeded to put it into execution at once.

Retracing her steps, she crossed the hall to the cellar door, learning from a blast of cold air before she reached it that it had been left open. The door hinged inwards, directly on to the flight of stone steps. By stooping a little Marion was able to see fairly well what was passing at the end of the cellar, and she had the satisfaction of knowing that she herself was in total darkness. Tasker was flashing the bullseye here and there on the *débris*, while Hoathley, leaning on the useless crowbars, was bewailing the miscarriage of his plans. The younger man was evidently incredulous of his companion's sincerity.

"Stow that gush," he said angrily. "I believe you either did this the other night and have collared the lot, or else

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you knew that it had been found, and brought me here to compromise me in killing the girl."

"Honour among thieves, honour among thieves," croaked the other, leering satanically. "I assure you, on the solemn oath of an ex-solicitor's clerk, that this is just as much a mystery to me as it is to you. I can only suppose that Zambra—I wish I had knifed him—has pirated my notion and forestalled us. Our course is clear. My poor, dear, somnolent niece must be permanently effaced, and we must then carry out our original plan of temporarily effacing ourselves—only, unhappily, minus the dibs—till it is safe to claim as next of kin. In the meanwhile, a year or so in Argentina will do us no harm."

What followed happened in a tenth of the time it will take to read it. Marion, satisfied that Hoathley's words had given her a clue to the villain's intended destination, rose to make good her escape, in ignorance that, while stooping, a fold of her dress had become caught in a projecting splinter of the old doorway. The moment she moved, the silence was broken by the sound of a long, wrenching tear that penetrated to the innermost recesses of the cellar.

Unable to repress a cry of horror, Marion saw Hoathley seize the bulls-eye from Tasker and turn its beams full upon her. In an instant he was springing up the steps, with murder on his face, and Marion remembered too late that she had made a fatal error. She ought to have unbarred the house door before she came there. Her retreat was cut off.

CHAPTER XIV.

The "Kid" Wins his Spurs.

On that eventful night, though the master himself was absent, a quiet alertness prevailed in Zambra's office, not two hundred yards from Tamponi's Restaurant. Passers-by were accustomed to seeing lights in those first-floor windows at all hours, so that there was nothing unusual in the exterior appearance of the house in the old-world bye-street, but within there were signs of activity that were exceptional so late in the evening.

The private room was vacant, with the gas turned low, but in the outer office Zambra's first lieutenant, Dickson—a pensioned ex-inspector of police—remained on duty to direct the movements of such of the staff as were actively engaged. Neil Fergusson, returned from Reading earlier in the evening, was resting after his labours and preparing himself for future emergencies by taking a nap in a chair. For the present the active executive consisted for the most part of a bright-faced boy of fourteen, known to his colleagues as the "Kid," and wise beyond his years.

The son of a struggling actor, and bred in an atmosphere of mimicry, he had first attracted Zambra's attention by his wonderful personations, and having distinguished himself in a few trial "shadowing" where a boy was wanted, he had now been more than a year permanently attached to the office. Full of enthusiasm for his craft, his leading sentiments were a great ambition to be considered a detective and a boyish hero-worship of his employer. The reader will recognise him as the little match-seller, whose intrusions into the bar the temporary "waiter" at Tamponi's affected to repel so vigorously.

The "Kid" had been employed, as we have seen, in keeping up communication between Zambra and the office, and on his return from taking over the report of Fergusson's abortive journey to Kennett's Cross, he was closely questioned by Dickson as to the chief's proceedings.

"The boss is fairly on the job," he replied mysteriously. "He's going to make someone sit up to-night; I could see it in his eye."

"Tell me exactly what you saw," said the ex-inspector.

"Just as I was dodging around to give him the note, he was taking two coves in tow to serve them with dinner in a private room upstairs," said the boy. "From the way he was carrying on, I guess they are the ones he's arter."

The boy was ignorant of the details of the drama in which he was as yet only playing a minor part, his knowledge not going beyond his own instructions to convey messages without incurring suspicion. Dickson alone of those in the office was entrusted with the full particulars of the case.

"What were the men like?" inquired the manager, referring to a written description of Hoathley, with which Zambra had furnished him.

"The one who was in first, waiting for the other, was a flash-looking young fellow—a kind of sham toff," said the "Kid." "The sort of chap that wears three-ten reach-me-down 'swagger' suits, goes to Margate for his holiday, and oils his half-guinea topper. The second one—he that came in last as I got there—was an oldish bloke, rather shabbily dressed, and with a rummy twist in his eyes that makes him look all ways at once. A little in the Ally Sloper line, I should say, but not so convivial."

"Good lad," said Dickson. "Now, what you've got to do is to slip back to Tamponi's and play about outside till those two men come out. If Mr. Zambra can get away at once without exciting suspicion, and shadow them himself, you may be sure he will do so; and in that case you can come back here to report the moment he is after them. But if you find that he has been unable to make an excuse to clear out quick enough to keep them in view, you must do it yourself, and not come back here till you know they have gone home to bed for the night, or till you have ascertained where they are off to."

"Do you know where they hang out when they're at home?" asked the "Kid."

"The young one lives at Worcester Park; we have not discovered where the elder man lives—but probably central."

"If they separate, which am I to follow?"

"The old one, most certainly," replied Dickson. "And if he makes any attempts to go out of London otherwise than for the purpose of accompanying his friend home to the suburbs, take a cab and come on here sharp to report what you have learned of their destination. I can't tell you what's in the wind just yet, 'Kid,' but it's a big thing, and if you play the game right the governor will make a man of you."

"I'm on," said the boy, and vanished down the stairs to execute his orders, while grave, grey-haired Dickson sent after him an approving smile.

An hour passed, the silence in the office only broken by the snores of Fergusson, the ticking of the clock on the mantlepiece, and the flutter of the newspaper with which the ex-inspector wiled away the time. Then the "Kid" glided in again, looking serious.

"Well, have they come out?" exclaimed Dickson.

"No, they won't yet awhile, or I shouldn't be here," said the boy promptly. "The boss has just taken up another course, and then there's dessert. They're having a regular swell feed, so I shall get back long before they've finished. I thought I ought to tell you that Big Harry, the racing man, has just gone into the bar—the same that was mixed up in the turf scandal case last year."

"What of that?" said Dickson. "Mr. Zambra never had him in hand personally. It was not till after the case was finished that it was rumoured that he belonged to the gang which was broken up. I very much doubt if the governor has ever seen him—that is, to know who he was."

"That's just it," returned the "Kid" eagerly. "The boss don't know him, and so won't be on his guard, but I'll bet Big Harry knows the boss. He was in court when the case was tried, and must have seen Mr. Zambra give his

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evidence. It struck me if Big Harry spotted him through his disguise—I allow it isn't likely—he might give him away."

Dickson stroked his grey moustache and thought for a minute before replying.

"You have done right to let me know," he said at length, as he scribbled a few lines and handed them to the boy. "You must try and let Mr. Zambra have this warning, if you can see or make an opportunity. You can play the match-box racket again, I suppose?"

"I will if you like, sir; but it would be much better if I could get into the place with some excuse for staying inside," was the reply. And then, after a pause, the "Kid" pleaded shyly, but with modest confidence: "May I work it my own way, Mr. Dickson? If you give me leave I will promise you shan't regret it."

"Very well," said the manager, "only remember whether you have been able to communicate the warning or not, my instructions hold good—to come here and report if the men leave the place followed by Zambra, and if they leave unfollowed to shadow them yourself, unless you can find to a certainty where they are off to."

The "Kid" nodded and disappeared behind a screen at the end of the room, to reappear with a rapidity that would have done credit to a "quick-change artiste," completely metamorphosed into the exact semblance of the typical schoolboy home for the holidays. He had not been gone two minutes, yet not a vestige of the dirty, shuffle-footed urchin of the street remained.

In place of him there emerged from behind the curtain a good-looking lad in orthodox Eton jacket and roll-collar, with a rosy face shining with soap and water, and holding, in one hand a pair of gloves, and in the other a neat silk umbrella. So fresh and simple did he look, that for a moment the veteran Dickson almost forgot the real character and detective training of the boy, and began to reproach himself for sending such a guileless innocent into a place like Tamponi's. But the "Kid" was downstairs again and half-way up the street towards the Strand before Dickson could decide whether or no to call him back.

The sound of the closing door awoke Neil Fergusson, and the sight of the giant Scotchman rising and stretching himself, inspired the manager with the idea of reinforcements.

"Neil," he said, "Mr. Zambra is over at Tamponi's restaurant on this Kennett's Cross affair. The 'Kid' has gone there to try and put him on his guard against a racing sharp who has a grudge against him, and might make trouble or give him away to the parties he's shadowing. I want you to go down there and be on hand outside in case either of them want assistance. The boy is spry enough, so you needn't show yourself unless called on."

"Is it like there'll be fighting, think you?" asked the old Guardsman as he promptly prepared to obey orders, the question being suggested by the knowledge that it was sinew rather than subtlety that was usually expected of him.

"Not with those the Governor's after; they're more foxy than valiant, I expect," replied Dickson. "But you had better take your 'persuader' with you. The frequenters of Tamponi's are a pretty hard crowd, and it is from this man, Big Harry, and his pals that a fuss is to be apprehended—if at all. The Signor is dead against any sort of a row at his place—good reason why—but if these sporting blackguards find Zambra is amongst them in disguise, they may go for him under the impression that he is on another turf scandal job. There isn't a clean conscience among the lot."

Fergusson was a man of deeds rather than of words, and, after acting on his superior's hint to arm himself with his blackthorn cudgel, he went out into the Strand. The great thoroughfare was teeming with traffic, and ablaze with the brilliant devices over the theatres, though, as the latter had not yet given out, the throng was yet to be augmented by departing audiences. True to his instructions not to intrude himself till he was wanted, the tall Scotchman kept on the opposite side of the way from Tamponi's, patrolling up and down under the old instinct of doing a "sentry-go," but never allowing himself to be more than fifty yards from the restaurant. The gauze-covered windows gave him no view of what was transpiring within; only over the top of the quarter-glazed door a row of shiny top hats, seen dimly through a mist of cigar smoke, told him that the bar was full of flash customers.

In the meanwhile the "Kid" had got to business. On reaching the restaurant he diffidently pushed open the swing doors, and advanced a few paces into the bar. Then he paused shyly as though scared at the sudden hush of loud voices, as the customers turned to regard the apparition of the trim little schoolboy with surprised amusement. The bar was filled with its usual nightly frequenters—betting-men, sporting journalists, and music-hall artistes, with a sprinkling of well-dressed individuals who were reticent as to their means of subsistence, but one and all of them belonging to that mysterious unenrolled brotherhood of sharps known to men about town as the "clever division."

The period of the "Kid's" return in his new character was just after Zambra had taken up that last bottle of wine to the private room, and the detective was therefore nowhere to be seen, but Big Harry was still leaning over the bar in whispered conversation with Tamponi, and the tinkling of the piano overhead reassured the boy that the party in which he was interested had not yet broken up.

"Well, my little fella, and what might you be wanting?" inquired the Signor, as soon as his attention had been drawn to the round-eyed picture of innocence by the remarks of those in front of the bar.

"Please is—is father here?" asked the "Kid" bashfully, fingering his umbrella with well-simulated nervousness, and making a half-motion towards his neat little bowler hat, as though not quite sure whether he ought not to take it off in such distinguished company. The gesture was really an artfully-conceived study, for the implied respect towards a lot of men who had long since ceased to respect themselves created a friendly feeling, and secured his position from the first.

"That's rather a large order, seeing that I don't know your father's name," replied the Signor playfully. "A good many of these gentlemen are fathers; perhaps you can pick him out if he don't like to own up."

Now the "Kid" had matured his story as he came along—rapidly, but with a due regard to local colour and detail. In the course of his professional duties he had become aware that a certain well-known actor, then playing at a Strand theatre, had a son of about his own age. The actor in question was much too big a man to be an habitual frequenter of a flash restaurant, though he would be likely to be known there; and moreover, he was playing in the last piece, so that even if he did look in at Tamponi's it would not be till close on midnight. By that time the "Kid" hoped that the affair in hand would be concluded, and he therefore decided to endow this gentleman with the honour of his parentage.

"My father's name is Waring—Danvers Waring—of Kelly's Theatre," he piped in a tremulous treble. "He told me to wait for him here, and he would call for me and take me home. I have been spending the evening at Maskelyne and Cooke's."

The news that the small stranger was the son of the popular actor was received with evident interest and implicitly believed by the loungers in the bar, and the Signor waxed especially gracious.

"Mr. Waring coming here after his performance is over?

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That is good," cried Tamponi. "We do not see much of him since he become such a swell—not now for more than six months. Most certainly you come in and wait. There's a nice comfortable seat over there in the corner, unless you like to stand up and drink like a man? Oh, you mustn't, eh? Not begun to get about the town yet, I guess. Well, there's plenty of time."

The "Kid" went modestly to the corner indicated at the far end of the room, and sat down on the velvet settee which his quick eye noted was close to and nearly opposite the foot of the stairs, thus giving him an early opportunity of learning of any movement on the next floor. It was possible too, he thought, that from this position he might be able to secretly pass the note to Zambra when next he came down, for the stairs were enclosed, and anyone descending was therefore out of sight of the people in the bar. The interest in "Waring's Youngster" soon declined, so that the boy occupied his post of vantage more or less unobserved amid the clatter of resumed conversation.

He had sat there some five minutes, gazing in pretended awe at the supposed strangeness of the scene, but never relaxing his watchfulness, when the jangling notes of the piano suddenly ceased—ceased, too, not at the end of a tune, but right in the middle of an unfinished stave. A moment later, looking up the dimly-lit stairs, the "Kid" saw a burst of light on the landing, and heard the muttered hum of excited undertones as a door above was opened. From where he sat, owing to the steepness of the stairs, he could only see the open space at the very top of the door, and that quickly vanished, as though the door had been immediately shut again.

From the continued whispering above he supposed that more than one person had come out of the private room, but he would have to wait till they appeared on the stairs before he knew who they were. He braced himself for the emergency, either to attempt to give Zambra the note, or to get outside on some excuse if it should prove to be the diners, so as to follow them himself if necessary.

He was not kept long in doubt. There was a sound like the turning of a key in a lock, and then Tasker appeared at the top of the stairs, with Simon Hoathley close behind. The boy saw that the time for action had come, and it flashed across his precocious brain that as he had to make a move, it would be best to do so before the men got down into the bar, as if he left his seat after their appearance and then followed them out, he might incur suspicion from some of the numerous "wrong-uns" present. He therefore rose instantly and went forward to the counter, coughing and spluttering.

"I think I'll take a walk in the street for a few minutes; this cigar smoke is rather——" he was beginning to say to Tamponi, when he was pushed aside by Tasker, who had Hoathley at his elbow. Leaning over the counter, the diamond-broker's clerk spoke a few rapid words into the Signor's ear, of which the boy could only catch the disjointed sentences: "A crack on the knowledge-box"—"thanks for the tip"—"locked on the outside"—"nothing to connect you with it"—"two hours' start"—"take care not missed for that time"—"going out of town for a spell."

The Signor looked somewhat perturbed at the communication, but Big Harry, who was standing by, answered for him. The "Kid," hustled almost into the folds of the betting-man's voluminous overcoat, heard him hoarsely whisper: "Good business"—"old score"—"I and my pals will see to that"—"best cut away quick." Then, with a hasty "good-night," Tasker and Hoathley passed out into the Strand, leaving the boy free to repeat and finish his pliant for fresh air.

"Right you are—cut along, sonny," said Tamponi, much too anxious to discuss the situation with his friends to care what became of the boy. The latter sped out through the swing-doors on to the side-walk, just as a hansom had pulled up at the kerb in response to Tasker'shail. Hoathley was already taking his seat while the clerk lingered a moment to give the cabman his directions. "Paddington to catch the ten-thirty, and drive like the devil," reached the straining ears of the young detective, and then Tasker seated himself beside his companion, and they were driven rapidly away. But no Zambra emerged from the restaurant in pursuit.

The "Kid" looked after the cab and made up his mind instantly. "No need to follow, seeing that I know where they are gone," he said to himself. "I don't like to quit this till I have found out what Mr. Zambra is up to. That talk about 'cracked heads' and 'locked doors' sounded ugly. However, I can't go in again for a minute or two after the excuse I made, so I suppose I had better run round and tell Dickson. It's a nuisance, because perhaps he won't let me come back."

He started at a run for the office, but had not gone far when he spied Neil Fergusson patrolling on the other side of the street. In a couple of seconds he had crossed over and plucked the big Scotchman by the sleeve; in twenty more he had told his tale and persuaded Fergusson to go and report what had happened to Dickson.

"But if the governor is in any sort of a fix in there we ought to go and tell the police and get them to enter," said Fergusson, turning back when he had gone a few paces.

"I wouldn't care to be the one to do it," replied the "Kid" with much conviction. "You know what Mr. Zambra is. He may be playing possum in there, as right as ninepence all the time, and a nice row there'd be if we had the shop raided and gave the job away. He'd sack the lot of us. I don't believe even Dickson will take that responsibility—unless he is sure there is real danger to the boss. It's just that I mean to find out."

"You're going back, then?" said the tall ex-guardsman, looking down at the little whipper-snapper figure with stolid admiration. "Well, more power to the pluck in your small body, Kid. You can lay odds I shan't be far away in case of need. And see here," he added, "that bounder was whispering about a locked door, you say. If they have taken away the key perhaps these will come in useful," and he handed over the bunch of skeleton keys which he carried in his capacity of mechanic to the office. Then he hurried away to apprise Dickson of latest developments.

To give colour to his pretext for a temporary absence the boy allowed another five minutes to elapse before returning to the restaurant, and then, before re-entering, he looked the house carefully over from the opposite side of the street. He noted that the window of the room over the bar was lighted up, and from the position of the door he had seen opened at the head of the stairs, he gathered that this must be the apartment where the dinner had been served.

No shadows flitted across the curtains, nor was there any sign of life discernible. The other windows on the first floor were dark, these probably belonging to private rooms not in request that night. There were lights in some of the windows on the higher floors, but these, he conjectured rightly, were in the occupation of the Signor's family. He felt sure that in the room at the top of the stairs, if he could penetrate to it, would be found the reason for Zambra's non-appearance.

Having finished his reconnaissance he cleared his face of all traces of excitement, and crept into the bar again with the "hope-I-don't-intrude" air natural to his assumed character. This time his advent caused no surprise, for the one or two new-comers, who had arrived in the interval, were quickly told by the others why he was there, and he returned to his corner seat with no more recognition from Tamponi than a friendly but distrait nod. The Signor was engaged in confidential talk with Big Harry and one or two other hawk-like "captains of industry" who had joined the group.

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The problem with which the "Kid's" brain was busy was, how to get on to the next floor, but though he was close to the foot of the stairs, he was as effectually barred from them as if he had been a hundred miles away. During the last quarter of an hour the bar had been filling up with recruits from the music-halls and theatres, and the extra waiter who had come on for the supper traffic, was busy preparing the restaurant for the late guests. The crowd, in noisy conclave at the counter, overlapped the approach to the stairs, and Tamponi and his cronies were at the end of the bar nearest to them. The boy's original intention had been to attempt to slip up unseen but that was now out of the question.

Suddenly a sparkle, instantly repressed, shot from his eyes, and he rose and fidgeted up and down the bar, as though tired of waiting for his fictitious father. This, as he intended, had the effect of drawing renewed attention to him, and soon several of the customers spoke to him, most of them desirous of "standing treat" to "Waring's youngster." After allowing himself to be pressed, he at length shyly accepted some lemonade, at the expense of some admirers of the absent actor, and having once began to thaw, he set himself to amuse his entertainers with boyish chatter. Then he waxed youthfully curious, and began to put questions.

"What is that funny thing in the corner?" he asked after a while, pointing to the end of the bar where he had been sitting.

"That's a plate-lift, sonny," someone said, "an arrangement for running the dishes and things up on to the next floor for use in the private rooms."

"I see," said the "Kid," with deep interest. "Why, it's almost big enough to take me."

"Oh, no; you could never cram in there," replied his informant, carelessly.

"I'm not so sure of that," chimed in one of the bystanders, a member of the *Yeller-Feller* staff. "I believe the young 'un would pack himself away in it right enough."

"Bet you a sovereign he can't," retorted the other.

"Done with you," snapped the journalist, to the "Kid's" great joy, justifying the expectation that in such company a difference of opinion was likely to result in a wager. "Here, come along, youngster," added the taker of the bet; "we'll soon see who gets the thick-un."

Feigning some reluctance, the boy was conducted to the lift, which was the usual box, under two feet square, working by pulleys up and down an enclosed wooden shaft. A chair was brought, so that he could more easily reach the level of the lift, and he was already commencing to squeeze himself into the narrow space when Tamponi first noticed what was going on, and Big Harry turned his scowling face in the same direction.

"Hi! you fellows—what are you up to there?" cried the Signor.

"It's only a bet, Tamponi," said one of the speculators. "Gummidge has laid me a pound the youngster can get into the lift. We shan't hurt the confounded thing."

The "Kid" did not know that on the proprietor's assent depended the last chance of life for a girl in a lonely house forty miles away. It was anxiety for his master that made his heart stand still as he waited for it, then beat high when it came: "All right; but you Johnnies pay if you break, you know."

Permission being thus granted, the boy resumed his efforts, and, as he very well knew he would from the first, succeeded in cramping himself into the lift. The loser paid over the amount of the bet, and went away in disgust, leaving the winner and his companions to celebrate the victory. The "Kid" made no move to leave his strategical position, but in the artless manner of a boy who has whetted his appetite for skylarking, evinced a desire for more.

(To be continued next week.)

"INDIGESTION

was sapping my strength, stiffening my joints, and making an old man of me long before my time," says Mr. Alfred Barnes, of Albert Road, Keynsham, nr. Bristol. "However, it is clean gone now, and its departure dates from the time I commenced taking

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Short Stories That . . . . . Make You Laugh.

We devote every week space in *Short Stories* to pithy, humorous anecdotes similar to those which appear in these columns. A prize of £1 1s. will be sent to the reader who submits the best storyette this week, and a Stereoscope to each of those whose attempts are used. The anecdotes may be either original or selected; in the latter case, the source MUST be stated. Attempts must reach the Storyette Editor, *Short Stories* Office, Henrietta Street, Strand, London, W.C., by Monday, June 17th. Postcards only, please. The prize of One Guinea has been awarded this week to Miss W. Turner, of Blundell House, Kensington, W., whose contribution is denoted by a star thus.*

FUDDY: "Really, now, I suppose the average amateur fisherman is the prince of liars." Duddy: "Perhaps so; but what about the man with his first baby?"

"THE last thing I sent to this paper," said Melancholis, "was accepted immediately." "What!" cried Scribe in astonishment, "what was it?" "A cheque for an annual subscription."

"MRS. MACPOWERS, don't be after pokin' yer tongue out at me, but act loike a lady for wunst an' come outside the door for a moment an' Oi'll make the ugly face o' you loike the map o' Ireland."

'I WONDER," said the man of a statistical turn, "I wonder how much powder is destroyed daily in useless salutes." "There must be a lot," said the frivolous girl. "But I suppose women will go on kissing one another just the same."

"I HAVE come to ask for your daughter's hand, Mr. Herrick," said young Waller, nervously. "Oh, well, you can't have it," said Herrick. "I'm not doling out my daughter on the instalment system. When you feel that you can support the whole girl you may call again."

BOBBY (who has been sitting patiently half an hour): "Mr. Boomer, I wish you would pop the question to Bella." Bella: "Robert, you naughty boy, what possessed you to make such a preposterous remark?" Bobby (sulkily): "Well, anyway, ma said if he did you'd jump at the chance, and I want to see you jump."

* AT Exeter Hall, London, a converted negro from West Africa was shown a collection of photographs. "What is this?" he asked, gazing with a look of wonder on one of them. "That is a snapshot taken during a scrimmage at a Rugby football match." "But has your church no missionaries to send among these people?"

"THE WHITE MAN WHO SCALPS HIMSELF."—This was the name the Indians gave Belzy Dodd, a hunter and trapper, who so awed the savages that he could travel alone across the plains in safety. The act by which he did this is described in "The Old Santa Fé Trail." Belzy Dodd's head was as bald as a billiard-ball, and he wore a wig. One day, at Bent's Fort, there being many Indians about, Belzy decided to have a bit of fun. He walked round, eyeing the Indians fiercely, then, dashing in among them, and shouting a war-whoop, he pulled off his wig and threw it down at the feet of the Indians. They thought he had jerked off his own scalp. Every one ran like a scared jack-rabbit, and for months not a redskin would go near him.

BAGLEY: "Have you recovered from your recent sickness, Bailey?" Bailey: "No, not fully." Bagley: "Why, you look as well as ever." Bailey: "Yes, but I owe the doctor £13 still!"

MERCHANT: "No, Flasherby, I am afraid your boy is not quite suitable. He has not got a—hum—a large enough understanding for our business." Flasherby: "Not large enough? Bedad, sor, he's got the biggest feet of any boy in the city, begorra!"

WIFIE: "What's the matter, Charlie?" Hubbie: "I've lost my collar button." Wifie: "Where did you lose it?" Hubbie (trying to be sweet): "Now, don't ask me that, dear; don't you suppose if I knew where I'd lost it, I'd go there and find it?"

"GENTLEMEN," said the member from North South Blankshire, "you twit me with having turned my coat. Years ago I supported this measure. Then I had a reason. But now, gentlemen, I have lost my reason." And he wondered at the deafening smile that pervaded the meeting.

A FRENCH soldier on active service was informed by the Mayor of his village that his father had recently died. In acknowledgment he wrote as follows: "M. le Maire, I heartily thank you for my father's death. It is a little accident that often happens in families. As for myself, I am in the hospital minus one leg, with which I have the honour to salute you."

THE MOTHER: "I want you to keep that young man at a distance, Jennie. If you don't he'll be proposing to you." The Daughter: "He has almost as good as proposed already." The Mother: "How is that?" The Daughter: "He said you would make a lovely mother-in-law." The Mother: "He did? Well, perhaps you had better accept him. You might do worse."

JENKINS (walking up the front garden): "What on earth——" (reads "No Admittance Except on Business") "What on earth, Mr. Parker, have you got that stuck on your front door for?" Parker: "Why, so many ornamental fellows call on my daughters that they are in one another's way, and as the girls don't go off I must do something to reduce the surplus! Coming in? No? Well, ta ta!"

SCEPTICAL PATIENT (to faith doctor): "How do you propose to cure this pain in my chest, doctor?" Faith Doctor: "I shall pass my hands over your chest a few times, then tell you the pain is gone, and it will be gone." Patient: "Ah, yes. Will you dine with me, doctor? You can perform the cure afterwards." Doctor: "With pleasure!" Patient: "Well, take this loaf of bread and rub it on your waistcoat a few times and say you have had your dinner, and you will have had it. If the experiment is a success we will go on with the chest cure."

THE other day a lady of large proportions and evident opinions upon the subject of woman's rights, entered a tram-car which was already crowded with city gentlemen busily reading their morning papers. "Are there no gentlemen here?" she inquired, holding on to the strap, and gazing scornfully around. No one spoke. Every head buried itself more deeply in the newspaper before it. At last, one mild-looking man quietly rose, and said, "Gentlemen, I am willing to be one of four to rise and allow this lady to sit down." That settled it, for the lady indignantly flounced out of the car and tranquillity was again restored.

"The Golden Dwarf" begins the week after next.

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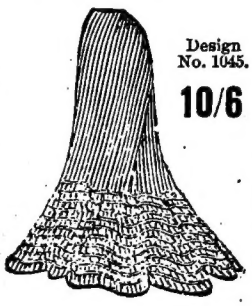

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THE EDITOR'S PAGE.

For the past few hours, dear reader, I have been intensely miserable. It has been all through a dream. Now, I am not a believer in dreams. That is to say, I do not think they have any significance for good or ill in the future. But this dream was an especially depressing one. Let me tell you what it was.

I dreamt that I dwelt, not in marble halls, but in my ordinary editorial office, and that the day for the publication of the first chapters of "The Golden Dwarf" had arrived. With the knowledge of this fact, it suddenly rushed upon my mind that I had made no announcement of this great epoch-making event in *Short Stories*. The thought stayed my heart almost, and chilled my blood. What would my readers think (my dream ran), to have this novel before them without their having been given a chance to tell their dearest friends, and thus allow them to share in the great privilege of perusing it? My heart beat slower and slower, my blood grew chillier and chillier. I verily believe it would have become a sort of many-branched red icicle in another minute, but fortunately I woke up. Relieved to find it was all a dream (the result of overwork, probably), I was still haunted by a vague fear that it might be true. And so, at the earliest possible moment, I referred to last week's number and the one previous to that. Therein I found that after all,

"The Golden Dwarf"

had not gone unannounced. Whereupon my spirits began to revive. When the new serial starts, viz., 25th June, I can promise you that your spirits (be they ever so low now) will revive, too.

A young and giddy correspondent, who is evidently a good judge, sends me the following:

The way to make "Not Enough" out of "Enough" is to take the third letter and place it first; then the second letter is placed in rotation, while the first letter is made to follow; the sixth letter should be placed fourth, the fourth letter fifth, and the fifth letter sixth. That makes "One Hug," which, my correspondent says, is "Not Enough" for any girl.

"Tenterden" wants to know why it is that professional men live longer than others.

There are many good reasons for this. In the first place, the struggle for existence begins later in professional life than in other careers. The professional man seldom begins his work much before twenty-five, while the business man or labourer goes to work at the age of sixteen. Thus the professional man has seven clear years of freedom from responsibility, moderate work, and healthy existence.

Secondly, the occupation of the professional man generally takes him to a considerable extent into the open air, and is very seldom entirely sedentary. Thirdly, the professional man generally enjoys that modest competence which saves him at once on the one hand from starvation or penury, and on the other hand from idleness and excess. Fourthly, his holidays are generally ample.

Fifthly, to a certain extent his livelihood generally depends on his leading at least a comparatively sober and moral life, violent excesses ruining both his standing and his business capacity. Sixthly, professional callings are exposed to very few special dangers. Lastly, since even a minor ailment often unfits a man entirely for professional work, he has a special motive in taking particular care of his health.

Yes, you are quite right, "Mamma." By the law of France it is forbidden to give infants under one year any form of solid food, unless such be ordered by a written prescription from a qualified medical man. Nursing-bottles provided with rubber tubes are also forbidden.

A correspondent sends me the following interesting communication:

This is a true story: On a rough winter night, a young man was going up to Dundee to spend Christmas with his friends. The journey had been a long one, and when the train stopped at the platform where tickets were taken before arriving at Dundee, the young fellow opened the window and put out his head to get a breath of fresh air. In a moment his hat was blown off, and sent scudding along the platform.

"Shall I have time to get it," he said to the ticket collector, "before the train goes on?"

"If you look sharp," was the answer.

He jumped out of the carriage and ran after his hat. But the chase was a long one, and he had to go nearly to the end of the platform before he recovered his property. Then he turned and ran back, but before he had gone many yards, to his unspeakable indignation, the guard blew his whistle, and the train moved off.

He was furious as he saw the end lights of the guard's van growing smaller and smaller in the distance. Then they suddenly disappeared altogether.

The Tay Bridge had collapsed!

"Timbuctoo."—In Persia, the tears of mourners are bottled up, as in the olden times. Each mourner is provided by the master of the ceremonies with a wad of cotton-wool, with which he wipes away his tears. This cotton is afterwards squeezed into a bottle, and the tears are preserved as a powerful remedy in extreme cases of sickness and a charm against evil influences.

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